

Her SISTER'S RIVAL



by
Albert Delpit *Illustrated*

CHICAGO

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BY

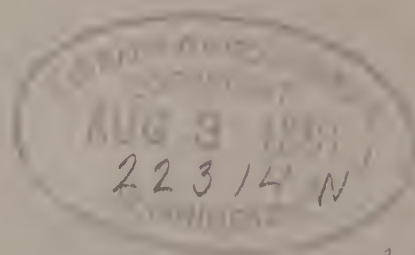
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Translated from the French by

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Illustrated



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HER SISTER'S RIVAL

I

“Then you are ruined?”

“Nearly so. I have squandered two millions in four years! But I don't regret it; I have had my money's worth!”

“That depends on tastes, my dear Maurice. How could you amuse yourself with those sporting men and painted women?”

Maurice quietly puffed his cigarette for a few minutes in silence, then replied with a peculiar smile:

“Well! you see, my dear Robert, it is not so important to amuse yourself as to believe that you are amusing yourself. Is not life a continual competition? Two or three of my friends kept racers; so I must have a stable

—an expensive luxury, I assure you! But that was nothing. You know that for the last two years I have had the reputation of having ‘the costliest women in Paris!’ This stupid phrase pleased me. I am vain, and my vanity was agreeably flattered. Then if you would add to women and racing, baccara and speculation.”

“Yes, it goes fast! And you do not include Clotilde in your enumeration! Nevertheless, 500,000 francs a year is a goodly sum. Have you nothing left?”

“Oh! yes. I have still an income of 20,000 francs. Not much, it is true; but at least, an independent and dignified existence.”

“Then, I understand you less and less. You are thirty years of age; you are not—fortunately—what we might call a ruined man; you have many friends, a foothold in society. More than enough to make life agreeable! So why should you bury yourself in the country?”

“Oh! I am weary of this life.”

“As bad as that?”

“And, besides, I am tired of doing nothing. Ah! how foolish I was to allow myself to sink in this Parisian mire!”

Robert Traville made a mocking gesture.

"You are like all idlers," he replied. "Question the hardworker, he will praise the charms of indolence."

"True enough. Perhaps I shall weary of work, but at least I will make an attempt to be useful—"

"Maurice! Indeed you are too droll." And as if to accentuate those words, Robert threw himself on the lounge and burst into a merry laugh.

Maurice de Fonde possessed the faults and qualities of the young men of to-day. He combined a great deal of simplicity with a great deal of skepticism. Our fathers have committed so many follies that the present generation has a certain disgust of life before even having any knowledge of it. Most of us practice a respectful indifference in religious matters; scarcely give a thought to politics. A few, through tradition or gratitude, believe themselves obliged to have an opinion; others shrug their shoulders with ennui when the King, or the Republic, is mentioned. Are they much to blame? They can so easily enumerate on their fingers the numerous regimes that have succeeded each other in the last century!

Maurice's great-grand-father was simply

called M. Defon, in one single word. About the year 1807 he conceived the ingenious idea of erecting a bathing establishment on the Rue Saint-Honoré. Were the people of the first empire wanting in delicacy? However that may be, this house was the first, or, at least, one of the first, which was furnished with relative luxury. Unwittingly, the bathing master had executed a masterly stroke, and so amassed wealth rapidly. A true royalist, despising heartily his Majesty, the Emperor and King, he devoted himself to the cause to some purpose. He was a liberal contributor to all royalist schemes. After the Russian campaign, the bathing establishment of the Rue Saint-Honoré became one of the asylums which sheltered the conspiracy of 1814, in which the Baron de Vitrolles was involved, and where the conspirators were prudently hidden from the sharp eyes of the Fouché and Savary. About the same time, M. Defon's younger brother fled to the United States to evade military service. When Louis XVIII. ascended the throne, he remembered the humble Parisian bourgeois, who had remained more faithful to the Monarchy than many aristocrats who had enlisted in the service of the usurper. The

shrewd king summoned the old man to the Tuileries, and judged him at a glance:

"You have proved your devotion in perilous times," said the merry monarch, "a reward is due you. What do you desire?"

Although quite overcome by the Bourbonian splendors, the bathing master had sufficient presence of mind to answer modestly:

"I have only done my duty, Sire, and I ask nothing."

"Decidedly, you are a man *de fonds*—Monsieur Defon," exclaimed Louis, who was an inveterate punster.

"Your Majesty has himself expressed my most ardent wish," said the bathing master, bowing low.

"Bah! What is it?"

"I want to be authorized to call myself 'Defon' in two words."

"Another one who wants the *de*!" laughed Louis XVIII., as he turned to his secretary. "I consent. Only be sure to tack it on both before and behind!"

And thus it was that Monsieur Defon, proprietor of the bathing establishment, Rue Saint-Honoré, became M. de Fonde as big as life.

There is still a nobility; there is no longer any aristocracy. The aquatic origin of the family was soon forgotten. Maurice's grand-father and father increased the fortune left by the bathing master; and as those who combine the reality of fortune to the appearance of nobility are always welcome in the Faubourg, everybody smiled on the newcomer. However, he was careful not to abuse the privilege. Society wearied Maurice. He preferred the race course, the high-class *demi-monde* and the *coulisses* of the small theaters. Occasional visits at the club maintained his relations with his more dignified comrades, whom he did not meet anywhere else.

But all things have an end. After a series of wild extravagances, the young man realized that it was time to turn over a new leaf. This man of thirty was not wanting in cleverness and intelligence. He was well aware that these are terribly practical days. Formerly, a man was still considered something through the money he had spent; to-day, he is worth only the money he possesses. The world in which we live—that world which is passing away—ignores pity and cultivates only egotism.

Maurice had calculated all this. And, unmindful of Robert Traville's sarcasm, he replied very quietly:

"My dear friend, with an income of sixteen or eighteen thousand francs, one is either poor or rich. If I remain in Paris, I can not abandon my present mode of life without humiliation. Imagine me leaving the Avenue de Messine for a cheap, eccentric and vulgar *quartier*. Of course, I could do like so many others. But my courage fails me. Better break off at once from habits I can no longer afford. While in the country, on the contrary, I shall be almost rich. I possess an old castle in the depths of Morvan, which my father had the bad taste of buying many years ago. I believe it is considered a beautiful piece of architecture; as for me, I find that mushroom nest simply frightful. Still, with a few bank notes, an architect can make five or six rooms quite habitable. And I will harvest my wheat and gather my vintage; furthermore I shall be *conseiller municipal*. How delightful! Just think! A change of existence! We are all like circus horses; we stupidly go round and round in an invariable track! I am out of the race—I must re-enter the stable! Waiter, the bill!"

It was a beautiful afternoon in May; and the two young men having finished their breakfast at the Café Riche, mingled with the oscillating throng hurrying along the boulevard.

"Two o'clock already," said Maurice, looking at his watch. "Where do you go, Robert?"

"It is Jenny's hour."

"How is Jenny?"

"Quite well; she is growing stout. Apropos, have you told the fatal news to—"

"To Clotilde? Not yet."

"Then it is high time! I suppose you have no intention of taking her to that mushroom nest you spoke of?"

M. de Fonde sighed, and a shade of sadness came into his eyes.

"How amusing it would be," continued Robert, in the same bantering tone. "I can imagine the amazement of the bourgeois of——. What do you call the large town near your château?"

"Arnay-le-Comte."

"Ah! Well, I can imagine the amazement of the bourgeois of Arnay-le-Comte when you make your solemn entry into the town! Clotilde, with her red hair dressed *à la chien* would paralyze the natives."

Once started in this vein, Traville gave free scope to his imagination. He described the splendors of Mademoiselle Clotilde Veronése—her true name was Francoise Clampin—suddenly transformed into a chatelaine. Then again, he portrayed Clotilde Veronese metamorphosed into a Louis XV. shepherdess, leading her white lambs over the prairie.

Maurice was still silent. In the great liquidation of his Parisian life, a single regret pierced his heart. He must leave this pretty mistress whom he had so much loved for a few months.

"Excuse me, my dear friend," said Robert, suddenly checking himself; "I jested without perceiving that you suffered. We have been friends so long that I know you better than you know yourself. I have never spoken of Clotilde until now, because we are not of the same nature. I distrust women; you—you swallow all they tell you! I am indifferent to Jenny, and you are serious with Clotilde."

"Alas!" retorted Maurice with a smile. "I always took my mistresses *au serieux*—and yet, I am not an imbecile."

"It may be on that account," murmured Traville, after a short silence.

"Will you dine at the club?" asked Robert, as they stopped opposite the Madeleine.

"Yes."

"Then I shall see you this evening. Go to Clotilde; I am going to Jenny. I believe in nothing, you believe in everything. You are affectionate through temperament; I am skeptical through vocation. Which of us is the happier?"



II

When Francoise Clampin left the Conservatoire she secured an engagement at the Vaudeville. She at once assumed the name of Clotilde Veronèse, and threw herself into the gay world. As might be expected, she had ups and downs—rich one day and poor the next. A Russian diplomat began the fortune of the young woman, and many others continued it. When Maurice de Fonde met her, she was rich enough to live on her income. Her last lover, M. Edmond Sorbier, had not discarded her without paying an enormous forfeit. These amiable creatures possess the agreeable faculty of recuperating very fast; and though Clotilde believed herself inconsolable over the loss of Edmond, she as easily fell in love with Maurice.

She inhabited a charming little dwelling on the Rue Ampère, which she owed to the generosity of M. Sorbier. For six months M. de Fonde visited her almost every day at two o'clock, and spent a part of the afternoon with her. But notwithstanding his assiduity, did she believe him faithful? Did she know she was deceived? Undoubtedly. Then why did she not complain? Simply because in liaisons of that kind there are many returns for one loan. However, Maurice pleased her by his natural tenderness, the generosity of his heart, and the loyalty of his conduct. He was more than handsome. His fine brown head resembled that of the *Cavalier couché* of Velasquez in the musee at Madrid. Of medium height, elegant and well built, he displayed in all his gestures the vigorous grace of his body. Being a skillful shot, he had fought many duels, and no one ever attempted to quarrel with him, as these encounters had always ended favorably for him. An observer would have remarked the strange brightness of his dark eyes, which expressed as much weakness as energy. Men who truly love women are usually of undecided characters.

“Ah! here you are at last!” cried Clotilde as Maurice entered.

“Am I late?” he asked.

“Not at all, my little darling; but I wanted to see you so much! If you only knew——”

She stopped as if embarrassed; and while she finished braiding her long hair, the young man devoured her with his eyes. What was her age? Her face accused twenty-five years; the register of her birth gave her ten years more. Small, white and rosy, Clotilde charmed at once by her graceful manners, the frank gaiety of her blue eyes, and her mischievous smile. Neither plump nor thin, just right, like a quail in September. Her patrician hands, however, were her greatest beauty; they were long and slender, as if a few drops of blue blood flowed in her veins. She had the reputation of being witty, and deserved it. Her parents, humble bourgeois of Evreux, placed her at an early age in a convent at Senlis. Both dreamed for their daughter “a first-class” education—prospectus style—which would fit Françoise to become an officer’s wife. Why? M. Clampin, when questioned on this burning subject, answered gravely:

“Sir, I am a Bonapartist. I admire the

great Emperor. Never will I accept a son-in-law affiliated to this infamous government. A soldier serves only his countr-r-r-y!"—(with three r's.)

And after delivering himself of this pompous declaration, M. Clampin would stick two fingers in his redingote like his favorite hero. At eighteen, Françoise lost her mother, and six months later the Clampin heiress realized the family dream. She gave her hand to an officer—but it was the left hand. Weary of her convent life, she eloped with a lieutenant in the cavalry. This was such a violent shock to the bourgeois of Evreux that he fell into an apoplectic fit.

That good education, however, was of great assistance to the young girl in building her fortune. Determined to become wealthy, she employed every means to attain her aim. What an aim!

"Sit down near me, my little darling," she said to Maurice. "Are you in a mood for conversation?"

"Why—yes."

"But you look very queer to-day."

They looked at each other for a few moments, embarrassed; he by the confession he had to make, she by a thought still unknown to him.

“Tell me, my little darling,” she resumed, “you have nothing to reproach your Clotilde, have you?”

“Why such a question?”

“You know, I have always been a good girl. I did my best to make you happy. You often told me that I was of a gay character, easily pleased. And, above all, not jealous! Oh! don’t shake your head; I know your little treacheries. But I forgive them because I love you. On my side, I have nothing to reproach myself. I have been faithful since the very first day——”

Even if caught in the act, a woman will always swear “on her mother’s soul”—that never—never—

“Therefore,” continued Clotilde, “I am better than you. Which of us two did as he pleased? You know very well that I always obeyed you. If it pleased you to go out, I went out. If you wished to remain home, I remained.”

Maurice was looking at her, more and more perplexed. What was she coming to with all these preparations? The young man knew that when a mistress sings her own praises, it is time to beware of her

“I do not insist,” resumed Clotilde; “you

would think that I wanted to give myself value; on my side, I was perfectly happy also. Only, because of you, I could not realize my dream."

"Bah!"

"To get married."

Maurice was startled.

"What, my dear, you want to get married?" he said with mocking irony.

"Your astonishment is not very flattering," said Clotilde, assuming an air of dignity worthy of a tragedy queen. "I believe I am a very good match. I have an income of fifty thousand francs."

"Accept my congratulations! You are three times as rich as I am," he interposed.

Clotilde stopped short, astounded at this unexpected revelation. With the extraordinary mobility of her mind, she forgot to pout any longer.

"What! you are ruined, my little darling?" she exclaimed.

"Almost."

"Almost? Oh! I feared you had nothing left to live on."

She said this giddily, without even suspecting her simple egotism.

"Then what will you do?" she added.

M. de Fonde now felt quite at his ease. It is always painful for a gallant man to leave a woman. An hour previous, Maurice suffered at the thought of losing this pretty mistress; but Clotilde's announcement simplified matters.

"I came to tell you the bad news," he rejoined, "but I see that we are two at the game. You are going to marry, and I am retiring to the province; we are both making an end of it. Now that you know all that concerns me, tell me your own little story. Who are you going to marry?"

"Doctor Brack."

"That quack! Why, you have only known him two weeks."

"That's the spice of the adventure. You remember what a bad sore throat I had two weeks ago? Well, having heard that he was a skillful Homeopathist, I sent for him and he cured me within twenty-four hours. Then he came back a week later to declare his flame—his *fla - - - ame!* I retorted by offering him the right hand instead of the left. And he took both! So we came to an understanding; and here we are."

So the two lovers could bear no grudge against each other. Clotilde was not leav-

ing Maurice, and Maurice was not abandoning Clotilde. It was a reciprocal freedom. In love everything was for the best when self-love is satisfied.

"You will permit me to offer you a wedding gift before I leave?" said M. de Fonde, as he gallantly kissed her hand.

"Thanks! What an amiable idea."

"As I was passing Jamain the other day, I saw a double pearl necklace, and could not help thinking how well it would become your pretty shoulders."

"Indeed! You are a *grand seigneur*," she exclaimed, throwing her arms around his neck.

Clotilde was well versed in all the tricks of her trade. Who would not be generous to be called "*a grand seigneur*?"

A discreet knock at the door interrupted the young woman's burst of affection. The maid, who was as shrewd and crafty as a Dorine, announced M. Doctor Brack.

"Your fiancé, my dear," laughed Maurice. "It would, perhaps, be more proper that I should not meet him."

But she did not see things in that light, and her pride rebelled.

"You have still a right here," she said.

“He knows how he takes me, does he not?” And turning to the maid, she said, haughtily: “Tell him to come in.”

Then, again turning to Maurice, she said, vivaciously: “Kiss your pretty Clotilde for the last time, my little darling!”

This breaking-off scene completely cured Maurice of his love. He was, however, curious to see his “legitimate” successor, the courageous adventurer who did not fear to give his name to one of the highest priced women in Paris. Doctor Brack entered. He was one of those professional failures who spend their lives running after an unattainable practice. About forty years of age, tall, thin and fair, with big blue eyes, the homeopathist resembled the conventional German of the popular five franc *chromo*. At a first glance, he might have been thought too simple; at the second, too shrewd. The receding forehead expressed craftiness; the embarrassed gestures, prudence. Everything about this man betrayed vulgarity and baseness. M. de Fonde read the character of this individual at a glance. A man of this description cares little for sentiment. Marrying Clotilde was a matter of business with him, and nothing more.

Clotilde introduced them ceremoniously, and Maurice withdrew. As the portieres closed behind him, he heard the young woman crying, affectionately:

“Kiss your pretty Clotilde, my little darling——”

The very phrase she had uttered to him! He gave a sigh of relief. He had done then with all those deceptions, with all those sentimental fripperies! He had completed the liquidation! Neither mistress nor debts remained. Maurice merely gave a slight shrug of the shoulders at the thought that he had squandered the greater part of his wealth on such women as Clotilde Veronése. These girls are not half bad! But false, greedy and vulgar! Vulgar above all. Fortunately, he still retained enough energy to tear himself from this nauseating mire. He longed for a peaceful and laborious life, where he would regain his manly dignity, lessened by the complaisances of salons, little boudoirs and clubs. Maurice unwittingly recalled Traville's mocking phrase: “You always took Clotilde *au sérieux*.” He had been very simple, no doubt! But, at thirty, one is still young. He could build up a future, and break off those bad habits. Once

buried in his château, he would be sheltered from temptation. He would associate with his neighbors, and at the end of a few months, who could say? he might, perhaps, meet the ideal young girl, destined to be his wife.

Man is born to feed on illusions. The philosopher has said: "Beware! you have in your brain a hobby whose song will charm you forever!" Maurice well knew his hobby. It was love. *Woman* dominated the life of this man, who was at once sentimental and sensual, and who naively strove to incarnate his dream.

In the evening, he dined at the club with his friend, Robert Traville. Then they went to the opera to hear the celebrated Madame Salbert in "Aida." But the young men did not exchange any more confidences.

"Then, you are really going?" said Robert, abruptly, as they were coming out.

"Yes, I am going."

"And Clotilde?"

"Clotilde is to be married."

Traville burst into a hearty laugh. Then he added, more seriously:

"I hope you will allow me to accompany you to the station?"

"No, I don't want to disturb you."

"As you wish. But you are wrong. When a convict leaves the galleys, at Nou-méa, his comrades politely escort him to the gate."

"Thanks, for the comparison!"

"It is just, nevertheless. You are also leaving the galleys, my good fellow: the Parisian galleys, to which we are condemned by birth, habit and tradition! You may be perfectly happy as a gentleman farmer, and I beg of you to forget my raileries of this morning. On one condition, however: beware of yourself! And, above all—no more follies for women."

III

The eleven o'clock express which leaves the Gare de Lyon is little patronized; it stops too frequently. Travelers prefer one of the fast night trains, which cross France so rapidly, and with such comfort. M. de Fonde was not long in finding an empty compartment. The same selfish thought that comes to all men crossed his mind: "What luck; I shall be alone!"

But he was somewhat hasty in his conclusion. Five or six minutes before the time of departure, a young woman opened the door of the compartment, and quietly took possession of the opposite seat. A tall and stout man, with a florid complexion, stood on the platform and handed her, one by one, the small objects necessary to the comforts of a journey—a silk cushion, a few newspapers and two or three books.

Though annoyed at this intrusion, M. de Fonde soon consoled himself. This *Parisienne* was very pretty! Tall, elegant and graceful, she betrayed the woman of the world at the first glance. Under the half raised veil, one immediately distinguished the woman sure of herself, whose beauty did not fear the crude rays of the matutinal sun. She quietly disposed of her effects, like an experienced traveler. Her companion leaned into the compartment and arranged the woolen rug about her feet.

"Thanks, my friend," she said with a smile. "I am quite comfortable now."

"Don't forget to send me a dispatch as soon as you reach Joigny?" said her companion.

"No, I shall not forget it. I will only remain long enough to kiss my poor aunt and return."

"Then, good-bye till Saturday, my dear Catherine."

"Till Saturday."

"I will meet you at six o'clock with the coupé."

"Take good care of Jacques."

"Do not fear."

He carelessly pressed the hand she ex-



tended, and the guard slammed the door. Then, with a sharp and prolonged whistle, the train moved out of the station. Maurice was making his *adieu* to Parisian life in the company of a very pretty woman.

When two persons of opposite sex, who are strangers to each other, are traveling companions, they each play quite an amusing comedy. They begin by observing each other with distrust, wondering if this chance companion will be agreeable or disagreeable. The woman carelessly passes her hand through her hair, while she apparently studies the scenery, or is absorbed in the pages of her book; but, in reality, she is observing the "enemy" from the corner of her eye. If he remains indifferent or evinces no curiosity, the vexed woman thinks: "What an imbecile!" If, on the contrary, he inspects his neighbor with that sly glance which reveals an observer, she says to herself: "I must look my best!" From that moment, if not too stupid, he will take the first opportunity to render her one of those small services which will authorize him to speak; if not too prudish, she will show that she is flattered by his attentions.

During the first half hour, Maurice con

tented himself with a few furtive glances at the unknown. "Decidedly, she is very pretty," he thought. "I like those imperious women, who have an altogether personal physiognomy. Her large black eyes are dazzling with their reflections of blue sapphires. The pale, pearly skin is truly that of a brunette. But, she is removing her veil——" M. de Fonde could now admire the wonderful, fine black hair, which crowned the noble and haughty brow like a somber diadem. Notwithstanding this scrutiny, she seemed quite at her ease. Whether it was that she was of a frank nature, or that she had confidence in him, she moved about freely and without embarrassment.

A short distance beyond Brunoy, the train came to an abrupt stop, caused no doubt by a danger signal. The shock displaced the young woman's leather valise from the rack. Maurice adroitly caught it as it fell and replaced it securely. He was thanked by a graceful inclination of the head, emphasized by a sweet smile. When they reached Melun, M. de Fonde arose, and bowing politely to his companion, descended to the platform. The stop was short; scarcely long enough to smoke a cigarette. Maurice had just

returned to his seat, when he was agreeably surprised to see his companion turn toward him.

"You are a smoker, Monsieur," she said; "my presence must disturb you——"

"Oh! Madame!" he protested.

"Oh, do not deny it! I judge you by my husband. You have my permission to smoke; I do not fear a cigarette——"

The ice was broken. As usual, the conversation began with an exchange of deep observations on the beauty of the weather. Then they spoke of theaters, of Zola's latest novel, of the celebrated singer, Alice Salbert, who had just made her triumphant debut at the Opera. When Parisians meet by chance, they always recognize each other at the first words. Do they not speak the same tongue? And how quickly they discover ideas in common! After the opera, Maurice mentioned the scandal of the day—a sensational law-suit, then being heard in the divorce court. A young girl, only two years married, had suddenly been abandoned for a former mistress. Maurice's companion listened attentively to his recital. The story of this poor betrayed woman seemed to possess a particular interest for her.

"Do you not think that Mme. de Noisel has been making much ado about nothing?" concluded Maurice.

A frown passed over his companion's brow.

"I see that you do not share my opinion, Madame," he rejoined, bowing.

"The reason is very simple, Monsieur. I am the intimate friend of Jeanne de Noisel, who I hope will soon again become Jeanne de Fierchamps. We were brought up together, although she is three years younger than I. You do not know this noble woman. I am the confident of her sorrows, and know her better than any one else."

"I believe you, Madame. But what an amusing situation! You are the wife's friend; the husband is one of my club comrades."

"Did you have a good opinion of him before this scandal came to light?"

"Mon Dieu, Madame——. We are so tolerant in Paris!" said Maurice with a smile.

She raised her head haughtily. Her dark eyes lighted up with a warm light that reflected the loyalty of her nature.

"I am a Parisian also," she retorted quickly. "But I do not think as you do, Monsieur. What you call tolerance, is to me only cowardice. I am indulgent for those

whom a passion leads astray, but I am implacable to vice. M. de Noisel is a vicious man, and his libertinism inspires me with horror and disgust. For eight months I closely followed the drama which has developed into the lawsuit you speak of. The perpetual lies with which he enveloped his treachery, have roused my indignation against this wretch. For me, a man who lies is a man condemned. He must truly have as little courage as dignity."

The young woman spoke in a sweet, thrilling voice, full of conviction and sincerity. In a few words she had revealed her character. When we have lived a great deal with women, we learn to judge *the* woman quickly. This stranger had first struck Maurice by the beauty of her face and the elegance of her form. She now inspired him with unrestrained sympathy, mingled with a little fear and a great deal of respect; and he almost immediately changed his tone and manner

"You are right, Madame," he said gravely. "Be kind enough to forgive my heedless words. I assure you I am better than I seem. If ever I return to Paris, your friend Mme. de Noisel will have no warmer defender than myself."

The most dignified woman is not insensible to the secret joy caused by a little triumph. And the traveler realized that she had won one. The somewhat disdainful haughtiness of her glance was tempered by a vague benevolence. From that moment she was more free in her conversation. Maurice, on his side, showed himself as he truly was when no constraint checked the frank spontaneity of his nature. Unknown to himself, he was imbued with the desire to please. Psychologists of all times have maintained that the more beautiful half of the human species alone practices coquetry. That is putting a slight on men. They are as coquetish, as much given to posing, and fully as pretentious as their perpetual enemy. M. de Fonde possessed the art of making himself agreeable. One does not frequent the divers Parisian worlds without acquiring some experience. Maurice had no wish to be misunderstood by this unknown woman. Oh, human heart! He had never seen her before, and, no doubt, would never see her again. One hour more, and this casual intercourse would be abruptly terminated at Joigny. Nevertheless, he did not want this graceful woman to carry away a bad impression of him.

M. de Fonde was endowed with kind and delicate sentiments, a ready wit, and a talent for repartee. This was more than enough to assure success, and he quickly won his cause. As the moment of separation drew nearer, the Parisian felt that he was gaining ground. The young woman now smiled at his discreet but amusing jests. At last the speed of the train slackened; they were nearing Joigny. Maurice felt his heart somewhat oppressed, though much astonished and even a little displeased at the sensation. For the last time, he cast upon the beautiful woman an ardent gaze, as if to engrave forever in his memory that sweet and haughty face. For an instant he had the hope of touching the delicately gloved hand; but as he prepared to jump to the platform to assist her to alight, she said, politely but coldly:

“Do not disturb yourself, Monsieur, I beg. I am expected.”

She bowed slightly; a footman soon presented himself at the door, and the young woman quickly disappeared without even turning her head.

An unexpected meeting, a brutal separation. Life contains such hazards. How could M. de Fonde suspect that the drama of

his life had begun, and that he would suffer through this very incident, he who had never known real suffering?



IV.

Alone, sunk in the corner of the compartment, he was thinking. To what world did she belong? To the best. Impossible to mistake the woman of gentle birth, of standing and of education. What did he know of her? Nothing, except her first name. She was called Catherine. The only way to obtain information was to write. As Catherine was closely linked with Mme. de Noisel, he could have hopes in that direction. But how was he to go about it?

If railroads had existed in Lafontaine's time, the fabulists would not have written :

"Que faire dans un gîte, à moins que l'on ne songe."

He would assuredly have modified his poetic meter, and substituted railway carriage for lodging, knowing well that the traveler, dashing along in an express, is a prey to the caprices of his wandering imagination. Little by little, by dint of thinking,

Maurice constructed a very simple and logical plan. He remembered having frequently met Jeanne de Noisel in Mme. de Ganges' drawing room. Once settled in his new home, he would write a carefully worded letter to the latter, questioning her without seeming to do so, without betraying his burning curiosity. Simple enough. But was he sure of not betraying himself? Mme. de Ganges was not wanting in shrewdness. A woman of the world like her, rendered suspicious and wary through the adventures of a gay life, would not be so easily deceived. But what did it matter, after all? In his heart Maurice admitted that he would be pleased if Catherine learned the truth. A woman, however reserved, and even prudish, is always flattered of having produced such a strong impression upon a passing acquaintance.

M. de Fonde now ceased to reason, and allowed memory to take supremacy. Closing his eyes, he evoked the fine and delicate face, with its pure lines and dark eyes—those large eyes which reflected the noble soul. Not a defect in this unknown one: supple, elegant, well formed, an enchanting voice and a sovereignly distinguished mien. Did she love her husband, that big, vulgar man who ac-

accompanied her to the station? Impossible! She must have been married to a fortune, to a position, as is often the case in France. At this point Maurice broke off with an angry gesture, exclaiming aloud: "How stupid I am!" Indeed, he was. Why dramatize an adventure which could have no sequel? What! A Parisian like him, a man bronzed by the life of the Boulevard, to fall in love at first sight! And with whom? A stranger he would never see again!

Many contrary ideas conflicted in the young man's brain. Is one an idiot because he obeys his fancy? Independence is a very rare happiness. No link restrains, no chain weighs. We do as we please, and we go where we please. Go whither we please? Then why should not he, Maurice, once more become the docile slave of his fancy? A few minutes more and the train would stop at Tonnerre. The young man could there alight, and after a few hours' waiting retrace his steps to Joigny.

M. de Fondc said all this to himself. However, in spite of the foolish desire that tormented him, he allowed the train to proceed without executing his project. A ray of common sense still remained in him, and

he saw the absurdity of the plan. How could he find any traces of Catherine? By what name should he designate her? And even if he were to brave the ridicule of an inquiry among the employes at the station, what practical result would follow? Even if after judiciously spending a couple of *louis*, Maurice gained his end, the young woman would still be out of his reach. He remembered the few words exchanged between her and her husband before the departure. She was going to visit her aunt. And what then? He laughed at the thought of her amazement, if he were to penetrate unexpectedly into that provincial drawing-room! After weighing all the consequences, he resigned himself to the inevitable. Who knows, but fate is sometimes intelligent. After bringing about a first meeting, it would, perhaps, bring about a second. Then Maurice remembered Robert Traville's last words; and his friend's advice helped him recover his reason. It was useless to leave Paris and bury himself in the province, if the exile did not put an end to his follies of other days.

The traveler whose destination is Arnay-le-Comte, is only half way when he alights at the station of Blaizy-Bas. He must still

traverse thirty kilometers of a rough mountainous country, abounding in admirable scenery. At this extremity of the Côte-d'Or, nature presents a rugged and picturesque aspect, which foretells the wild grandeur of the Morvan. Everywhere, steep cliffs, thick forests, whose blue depths dot the red earth with sombre tints. Numerous streams fall in cascades, hewing a tumultuous path between the rocks. The road is never level, sometimes ascending the cliffs to descend again, almost perpendicularly, into the depth of the valleys.

Two hours after its departure from Blaizy, the diligence stopped in the bourg d'Epagnet to permit Maurice—the only passenger—to dine. The night was delicious. A perfumed breeze glided among the trees, and the full moon threw its silvery rays over the sleeping plain. The herds were already under shelter for the night, and, now and then, the stillness was broken by the barking of a dog, or the regular strokes of a church bell. Maurice gazed around him, silent and charmed by the profound calmness of beings and things. What tranquility after the noise of the boulevards! What freshness after the furnace heat of the

city! Wearied by the fatigue and disillusion of his former life, he tasted the delights of this unbroken repose. He did not even ask himself if he commenced existence in this retreat with a peaceful heart and brain. He had no suspicion that *ennui* might soon come. Or if for a moment this idea crossed his mind, he drove it away like one of those importunate thoughts that haunt us, and that should be quickly thrust away.



V

“Yes, my dear Madame Pernette,” said Mme. Poppleton, “*he* arrived last night. Six trunks! And that is only the beginning. My maid was told yesterday at the Hotel de l’Ecu, that M. de Fonde would live at Charmoises.”

“Are you sure?”

“He brings his establishment from Paris.”

Mme. Rosalie Poppleton was always well informed. She was short, stout, lively as a ball, knew everything and neglected nothing. She was the great gossip of Arnay-le-Comte, and was much respected on account of the snug little fortune she possessed. The happy M. Poppleton, son of a rich vine grower, had nothing to do. His wife governed the house and reigned in the drawing-room. Quite amiable, without malice, like most fat

persons, she still excited platonic passions in spite of her forty years. All "well thinking persons" visited her. For the little provincial towns of to-day no longer know the subdivisions of other times. Fifteen years ago the nobles and bourgeois never went out of their respective world. Never would Madame de Mathivon, née Cocusse, and Countess through the Pope's kindness, but proud as a Montmorency, have permitted Mme. Poppleton to enter her door. However, the definitive victory of the Republic has changed all this by opposing local ambitions. Two groups shared the supremacy in Arnay-le-Comte; the friends of the government headed, by Mme. Balivet-Lamothe, and the upholders of the opposition, ruled by Mme. Rosalie Poppleton.

Mme. Balivet-Lamothe was the living contrast of her rival. Tall, thin, the skin glued to her bones, she betrayed at the first glance the provincial "*politiquette*." Her husband, who was local receiver of taxes, dreamed the splendors of a general treasurership. Being the grandson of the famous Lamothe, the Conventional regicide, he very skilfully took advantage of his origin; never recalling it when the future seemed doubtful, and citing

it ostentatiously when Republican ideas prevailed. Thus, until the third president of the Republic, he simply called himself M. Balivet. But as soon as it became useful to link himself to revolutionary souvenirs, he assumed the name of M. Lamothe. By dint of hiding or dragging forth his grandfather as the occasion required, according to the caprices of the ministerial barometer, the worthy functionary had succeeded in obtaining the favor of his successive chiefs. This proved the equilibrium of his mind! Before every general election, the receiver of Arnay-le-Comte united Lamothe to Balivet. An adroit way of conciliating everybody!

When "society" learned through the notary that M. de Fonde was repairing Charmoises, there was a general cry of astonishment. Astonishment was soon succeeded by sympathy. Everybody praised the young man for renouncing Paris for the province. However, the same question agitated them all. Whom would he visit? Where would he be received? But Madame Poppleton was on this very day discussing this grave question.

"M. de Fonde will be one of us," she declared. "It cannot be otherwise. You must

remember that he belongs to the *haute noblesse*. Madame de Mathivon assures me that a de Fonde and a Mathivon were crusaders together under Louis VII."

Those ancestors may have been at the crusades, but as scullions, nothing better!

Rosalie's friend, Mme. Pernette, prudently abstained from disapproving. Besides, with Mme. Poppleton, one only found time to interpose exclamations. The good woman chattered as a faucet flows. During the afternoon, she visited all her acquaintances, that she might have the pleasure of announcing the great news. If she had only suspected the joyful surprise that awaited her!

Maurice was not aware that his arrival would set the provincial tongues wagging. As he troubled himself little about others, he thought it absurd that others should trouble themselves about him. After a copious breakfast at the Hôtel de l'Ecu, he started out for a stroll. Naturally he turned his steps in the direction of Château-Charmoises, where he expected to lead such a wise existence, intending afterwards to visit the Abbé Mingral, curé of Arnay-le-Comte, who had prepared him for his first communion as a twelve-year old boy.

What a strange aspect this feudal castle presented! A large, heavy and massive dwelling, built of cheerless gray stone. At the four angles, flanked by towers, extended four iron arms, rusted by age, from which Gaspard de Coligny's companions hanged many Catholics during the religious wars. On a level with the ground floor, was a broad flagged terrace, which led to the flower garden by a flight of a dozen steps. At the extremity of this garden was a second stairway—an enormous stairway of forty steps—descending into the kitchen-garden. In the distance, as far as the eye could reach, the Argente flowed, joyous and clear, over its pebbled bed.

The château had been uninhabited for many years. The young man soon convinced himself that the architect from Dijon had understood and carefully executed his orders. The ground floor and the first story had been renewed and completely restored. As soon as his Parisian furniture arrived, M. de Fonde could take possession. His valet would arrive this evening, and he had orders to engage a staff of servants, especially a good cook; when a Parisian becomes a provincial, it behooves him to turn a regular

gourmand. His inspection over, Maurice could not resist the desire to continue his ramble. What a delicious spring day! The blue sky, the soft air, the green paths, always tempt, at first, the exile from the Parisian Boulevard.

An immense park formerly surrounded the Château des Charmoises with its living growth. Maurice's father had commenced the cultivation of this unprofitable land. At that epoch, forests were left intact, and only served for the pleasures of life. Fortunately, the forest recommenced two kilometers further on. Maurice felt a strong impulse to penetrate into it, and dream under the shelter of its trees. He remembered the large glades, the carpets of verdure and the enormous oaks filled with birds.

He was just entering a path shaded by beech-trees, when he saw a young woman coming toward him. A large gainsborough hat concealed her features, but he was too good a judge of toilets not to recognize a stylish woman by her mien and costume. She wore a cream-colored silk dress with small embroidered flowers. A very simple costume, but of exquisite taste, which revealed the fashionable woman at the first glance.



She did not see him at first, seeming solely preoccupied by the search for her poodle, calling incessantly, and looking eagerly to the right and left. Maurice was advancing slowly toward her; suddenly he stopped and gave a cry of stupefaction, almost of alarm. Catherine stood before him! Catherine, the unknown, the traveling acquaintance whom he believed so far away and forever lost to him! The young woman looked at him with mischievous curiosity. She saw the effect she had produced, and her vanity was agreeably flattered. As Maurice bowed to her she said in a sweet voice:

“Pardon me, Monsieur. I will be very thankful if you will render me a service. You have just crossed the plain; did you meet my dog?”

M. de Fondestammered a few unintelligible words. He stood bewildered, understanding nothing, wondering if he were in a dream. The young woman walked like the *other*, she looked like the *other*, she spoke like the *other*, with the same musical intonation, with the same bewitching smile! Impossible, however, that it should be the same woman. Catherine had left the train at Joigny. She was met at the station. Impossible also that such a re-

semblance could exist. Then, what did it mean?

"I beg your pardon, Madame," he finally said, "if I hesitated to answer. I was interrogating my memory, but I can give you no information. Permit me, however, to aid you in your search."

She thanked him with a graceful inclination of her head, and Maurice bowed politely. For a quarter of an hour they both affected the deepest solicitude for the lost poodle. At last, by dint of ferreting through the thick shrubbery, they discovered the fugitive dog in a glade, stretched out his full length, warming himself in the sun. A singular curiosity tormented M. de Fonde. Evidently these two women were united by a close link. The unknown of the railway carriage must surely be a blood relation of the unknown of the forest. Twin sisters, no doubt. Was not this the only way to explain this astounding resemblance? When they reached the edge of the forest his new acquaintance again thanked him warmly.

"I congratulate myself on my good fortune in meeting you, Monsieur," she said. "You must be a stranger in this country?"

"I arrived only yesterday, Madame. I

have come to make my home at Charmoises, which I have not seen since my childhood."

Maurice intentionally gave the name of his residence, thus indirectly introducing himself.

"Ah! you are M. de Fonde," she exclaimed, raising her dazzling eyes to his.

He bowed an assent.

"Then we are neighbors, Monsieur. The river which flows through your park crosses my garden five or six hundred meters further on. But we separate here. You are going back, I presume; I continue my walk."

After a slight inclination of the head, she took a path that wound round the hillock. Maurice stood motionless, watching her disappear, already bewitched by the supreme charm that disengaged itself from her every motion. The adventure enchanted him, especially the mysterious side of it, which rendered it still more delightful. Thus, within thirty hours, he had met the same woman in two different women! His memory evoked recollections of Catherine, and the extraordinary resemblance amazed him more and more. Both tall, supple and graceful, both brunettes, with the same pearly skin, with the same dark eyes of a deep blue tint. .

As he walked on toward Arnay-le-Comte,

Maurice felt himself slowly invaded by a sweet emotion. Unconsciously, he was weaving an odd romance. First of all, he must know who this neighbor was. This curiosity could be easily satisfied. Was he not going to visit the abbé? Nothing more simple than to adroitly question him.

Maurice remembered Abbé Mingral very well, as he had been one of his father's greatest friends. Since thirty years, this worthy man occupied the position of curé in Arnay-le-Comte. Many successive generations had been blessed by this beloved priest, who was respected by even the unbelievers. Although past sixty, he still retained that warm faith of enthusiastic hearts which cannot be dampened by the deceptions of life. He received his parishioner with open arms.

"I already knew of your return, my dear child," he said kindly. "And I am pleased to see that you have not forgotten me."

"I wanted my first visit to be to you, Monsieur le curé," replied Maurice. "Although the man I am at present has not, alas! retained the innocent faith of the child you have hitherto known, there still remains the remembrance of your kindness in my heart. That is enough to make me happy in thus expressing all my gratitude."

The abbé pressed the young man's hand warmly, and led him into the garden. A veritable curé's garden, as carefully tended and trimmed as an old maid's parrot. The worthy priest was not in the least inquisitive; but Maurice was anxious to inform his old friend of the cause of his exile in the province. He related in a discreet manner the follies of his past life, making himself neither better nor worse than he really was, and good humoredly admitting his faults. The abbé listened, vaguely interested.

"Then you are condemning yourself to what might be called a retreat?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose so," replied Maurice.

"You will have but few distractions here."

"But, I assure you, I don't want any."

"Oh! you may think so now," said the abbé, smiling. "You are not the only one who, weary of Parisian agitations has believed himself charmed by the tranquility of a provincial life. *Ennui* comes so soon!"

Then, in reply to the young man's protestations, he jestingly added:

"First, have you a political opinion?"

The conversation was here interrupted by the servant.

"Madame Poppleton wishes to know if Monsieur le curé will receive her," she said,

"At this announcement the abbé burst into a merry laugh.

"Madame Poppleton comes apropos!" he said. "I should have been less explicit than she. I know she will enlighten you on everything. Let us join her in the parlor."

When the excellent woman realized that she was being presented to M. de Fonde, the famous new comer, who had been the sole subject of conversation in Arnay-le-Comte since morning, she blushed with happiness. And with what a glance she scrutinized him! This young man was indeed quite charming. She was no longer astonished at his good taste in preferring the province to Paris. After a few moments of conversation on general subjects, the bourgeoisie astounded Maurice by asking him the same question as the curé.

"And what are your political opinions, my dear monsieur?" she inquired eagerly. "I am sure you must be one of us."

Maurice was forced to confess that he took little interest in politics. It is a subject not much in vogue on the Boulevard.

"What! you have no opinions?" cried the good woman, in amazement.

"I have not even any preference!"

"Then, how do you pass the time in Paris?" was the naive cry of her heart.

Once launched, Mme. Poppleton never stopped. In one breath the chattering Rosalie described the habits and customs of Arnay-le-Comte, told M. de Fonde he might visit this house and not that other one, because not approved by "society." And what discretion he must use in the choice of his trades-people!

In fact, the same state of things existed in this little country-town as exists almost everywhere else in provincial France. Politics have even invaded the private life of its inhabitants. The good people of Brussels have made this ridiculous hobby the fashion for fifty years. The baker that supplies the Liberals is not the baker that supplies the Catholics. And it is so in all the French departments. No one escapes the party spirit. Through ambition, as much as through fear, the provincials allow themselves to be blindly enlisted; and this arouses secret and inevitable hatreds and feuds.

Mme. Poppleton's babbling was boring Maurice, but he heroically endured his martyrdom. Being a stranger in the country, he knew that he must inure himself to the

habits of the people among whom he was condemned to live. In reality he was penetrating an almost mysterious world, the existence of which he did not even suspect. Tolerance is so great in Paris that we cannot conjecture the frightful struggles excited by Bordeaux politics in Marseilles, and by Marseilles politics in Dunkerque! We must not accuse the boulevard of skepticism: this stereotyped phrase has served too much and too long. The truth is more simple and less complicated. Parisians are not massed together, and besides they have a thousand subjects of conversation which help them avoiding irritating questions. Moreover, they are not always lying in wait for official positions and fat sinecures. The ambitions, which exist there as everywhere else, are lost in the midst of an enormous city. And then, as La Bruyère has said, there are "idle, unoccupied and dull people" everywhere. The best means to remain unoccupied is to busy yourself about others!

VI.

The abbé was too shrewd not to see his young friend's annoyance. He tried to stop Mme. Poppleton's flow of words.

"Madame is right," Maurice hastened to say. "I am sure the country will please me very much. Ah! I had such a delightful ramble this morning!"

And he related his morning's adventure; his walk in the forest and the unexpected meeting, the remembrance of which still charmed him. At the very first words Mme. Poppleton pricked up her ears. Such a gossip as she was must know the "unknown"—that unknown who so strangely resembled the *other*. Maurice was not mistaken.

"Why, that is *Soif d'Egards!*"* cried Rosalie, triumphantly.

* Eager for attentions.

"There, there, Madame; you promised me to be indulgent," said the priest, severely.

"You know very well, Monsieur le curé, that I did not give this nickname to Madame Huberte Andrézy."

"That may be," he replied. "But you make use of it. That is already too much." Then turning to Maurice, he added: "She is one of my best parishioners, I assure you. You must not believe what you hear of her. You have seen the woman and you appreciate her. But I know the christian."

"Christian! christian!" echoed Mme. Poppleton, with a disdainful toss of the head. "What about the story of the confession?"

"I believe I am the best judge in such matters," continued the priest, authoritatively. "Madame Andrézy possesses high qualities, rare qualities—especially in this country. She always spares her neighbor. She has, for me, that very great merit of never meddling in the affairs of others. That is a compliment I could not address to everybody."

What was this story of the confession? and why that nickname of "*Soif d'Egards?*" It was more than enough to excite the young man's curiosity. This pretty Huberte in-

terested him doubly. She appeared like a living enigma to him. The Parisian, however, was clever enough not to solicit any confidence in the presence of the abbé. He knew that Mme. Poppleton would not dare brave the anger of her spiritual director. He, therefore, made himself as agreeable and pleasant as possible to the meddlesome gossip.

"I am very fortunate in meeting you here, Madame," he said, politely. "However, as I intended to make my first visit to you, I would have had that honor to-day or to-morrow."

The good woman could scarcely conceal her delight. What success! And what a charming young man! Ah! we recognize at the first glance those young people who are not brought up according to the deplorable principles of the new school!

The abbé suspected Maurice's little ruse, but his smiling good-nature was amused by the tact displayed by his young friend. Besides, priests have always loved diplomacy. He was not, therefore, much astonished to see Maurice arise to take his leave at the same time as Mme. Poppleton.

"Will you permit me to accompany you, Madame?" said Maurice, bowing.

"I shall be only too happy, Monsieur."

The worthy ecclesiastic could scarcely repress a smile at this exchange of conventional phrases. As they both disappeared, however, he must have thought with a sigh that poor Madame Andrézy would not be spared. He knew that Maurice would give the reins to his curiosity.

In fact, they had scarcely reached the road when Madame Poppleton commenced the little story with her usual *entrain*.

"Our dear abbé is very severe with me, Monsieur," she said, plaintively. "I do not like—no, not at all—to hear my neighbor ill-spoken of. Madame Huberte Andrézy is indeed a charming woman. No one in all Arnay-le-Comte esteems her more highly than myself."

She paused for a moment, and then resumed in a livelier tone:

"But what difference does it make? We are all very indulgent in the province; and also very simple. And we never like to see anybody display useless pride."

And for a good half hour, she went on without stopping, relating the whole history of Mme. Andrézy since her arrival in Arnay-le-Comte. It was, after all, but a very com-

monplace story. One day a very pretty and stylish young woman, recommended by the Bishop of Evreux to his friend Monsieur l'Abbé Mingral, had arrived in the provincial town. As she was well received by the curé, the young woman was invited everywhere. Unfortunately, she was merry and laughed a great deal; she was therefore considered impertinent. She was, however, very polite to others, and exacted a similar politeness toward herself in return. A wit of the town, on this account, surnamed her "*Soif d'Egards!*" The nickname was a success. It concealed all the spite of the plain, vulgar, stupid and dowdy provincials against this pretty, accomplished, stylish and intelligent stranger. Madame Andrézy was too shrewd to enlist in one party, or join either of the political camps. She visited the people who pleased her, and received them in an affable manner. The evil tongues immediately cried: "*Soif d'Egards* is a skeptic!" The young Moman retorted by a few malicious witticisms. Disgusted by the pretensions to nobility of three or four country dolts, she humbled their pride in a very clever manner. And as a climax, she had written to Madame de Mathivon, who was so proud of the quar-

terings she was not entitled to, and had addressed the envelope: "Comtesse de Mathivon, née Cocusse."

In provincial society a witty woman is powerful because she is dreaded. Madame Huberte Andrézy having made herself feared, her enemies thought it more prudent to lay down their arms. They still called her "*Soif d'Egards*," but only in private. And, besides, she led the life of a wealthy person. Her house, "*Les Audliettes*," was kept up in a style that astounded the good bourgeois. Madame de Mathivon was furious when she heard the president of the tribunal declare "that Madame Andrézy possessed some ancient and very valuable furniture." Moreover, Huberte kept four horses, a coupé and a victoria that dazzled every one. Whence came this wealth? They did not dare slander her; the Bishop of Evreux and the curé protected this stranger from malicious suppositions. It was then that the great scandal suddenly burst; the affair of the confession!

To this day public opinion is divided concerning this burning topic. Like most memorable events, it is obscured by the shadows of history! But the following is the version that triumphed:

Madame Andrézy, though not a pagan, displayed very lukewarm religious sentiments. She was never seen at church except on Sunday, and never fulfilled her Easter duties! One day the abbé invited her to come to the confessional, and to take him for her spiritual adviser. Huberte did not dare refuse. But she went straight from the church to Mme. Balivet-Lamothe, the leader of the republican party. And this is what she related:

“Yes, my dear Madame, I have just been to confession. You are astonished. Well, so am I. ‘My dear child, are you a widow?’ asked the abbé. ‘Yes, Monsieur le curé.’ ‘When your husband was living, did you ever deceive him?’ ‘Never!’ ‘Now that you are free, have you ever any bad thoughts?’ ‘Always!’ And he went on asking a lot of questions: if I fasted on Friday; if I observed Ember days; if I fulfilled my Easter duties, not being domiciled in Arnay-le-Comte. All this wearied me. Only think of a man of sense entering into those little details! I had expected that he would keep within—within the main lines! So I ran away, leaving the benediction floating in the sacristy!”

This amusing anecdote had an enormous success in Mme. Balivet-Lamothe's drawing-room. A success that soon became a scandal. Whether the story had been exaggerated, or whether the abbé had the pious desire of converting his parishioner, he continued to protect the pretty Huberte. So well did he do this, that although disliked by some, and calumniated by others, she continued to be received in all the drawing-rooms she visited. For, after all, no one attacked her private conduct, which was believed to be irreproachable. No one, therefore, attached much importance to the whims that suddenly came into her foolish head. One day she announced that in the future, she would spend forty-eight hours of every week with one of her friends, newly arrived in Dijon. Thirty-five kilometers only separated the two towns. The young woman left every Saturday afternoon, comfortably installed in her landau, and returned two days later.

Naturally, Madame Poppleton had an opinion of her own about the matter; indeed, she always had an explanation for every incident.

When Maurice had politely escorted her to

her own door, he walked on, in a very thoughtful mood. Huberte pre-occupied him more than ever since he was initiated into the gossips and tittle-tattles, or as Mme. de Remusat called it "*the petoffes*" provoked by the young woman. There was evidently some mystery about this unknown beauty. How much could he believe of these stories gathered right and left?

The clever and witty Parisian tried to reconstruct the psychology of this feminine character. First, it was evident that no one in Arnay-le-Comte had seen what appeared singular, obscure and unexplained in this seemingly very limpid life. That Madame Andrézy led an irreproachable existence since her arrival in this little town, he did not doubt. But before that? A suspicion entered the brain of this man of the world, who placed little faith in what M. Prud'homme called "feminine virtue." She was a Parisian. He was sure of that. He recognized her by her wit, her elegance, even her way of talking. Huberte did not at all resemble the provincials. And then Maurice remembered the *other*! Catherine and Huberte must be twin sisters. The fable of the *Menechmes* is not repeated in real life. Ro-

mance alone can create two strangers exactly similar to each other.

Maurice was either mistaken in his conjectures, or he was right. If he were right—ah! then everything became clear. One of the sisters lived in Paris with her husband and family; the other was compelled to bury herself in the country in consequence of some scandalous adventure. It was natural that Arnay-le-Comte “society” should not guess this. To begin with, they were ignorant of Catherine’s existence; then, the episcopal recommendation protected the young woman’s past from suspicion. In a word, Maurice was undoubtedly interested, and his curiosity excited to the quick. He must again see Huberte, at any cost. Of course, as a new-comer, he owed her a visit; but he must wait a few days. And these few days would seem very long!

VII.

Next morning Maurice was lounging along the paths of his grounds, when his valet announced that two persons wished to see him.

"Two persons, Constant? Can I not be left in peace! What do they want?"

The valet assumed an amused air.

"Explain yourself! Who is it?"

"Monsieur will excuse me," replied the servant with comic gravity. "It's the corporal of gendarmerie, accompanied by a workman. They say it's about the posts."

M. de Fonde was puzzled for a moment. What could they want about the posts?

"Very well; I shall go," he said resignedly.

The corporal, a middle-aged man, awaited, standing with his arms crossed; while the workman, a young fellow of twenty, was

scrutinizing right and left, looking curiously at his surroundings.

"Well, corporal, it seems that you wish to see me," said Maurice, as he walked up to them. "What is your business?"

"It's about the posts, Monsieur," replied the corporal, as he pointed to the row of white posts planted along the Argente at equal intervals.

Maurice's face expressed so much bewilderment that the workman laughed outright.

"I see that you are a Parisian, like myself," he said.

"Ah! you are a Parisian, my good fellow," said Maurice, laughing in his turn. "Well, then, I beg of you to explain this post business."

"To begin with, Monsieur, there will be an election in this department within two months. Are you registered among the voters of Arnay-le-Comte?"

"Why, I never voted in my life!"

"Then you can't understand; it is beyond you. Eight years ago the government wished to conciliate the voters of Arnay-le-Comte. So they promised to construct a railway connecting with the Lyons line at Beaume. But the provincials were distrustful; so many

promises are made on the eve of an election that are never kept. The prefect, however, sent for a few surveyors a couple of weeks before the election, and they took measurements, studied the ground. It was a one day marvel! Everybody said: 'At last we shall have a railway.' But after the election the surveyors vanished, and were not again seen until four years later; that is, at the next election. This time those crafty men did better; they planted posts along the proposed line. Confidence returned. The whole department regained courage, and the most incredulous repeated: 'At last we shall have a railway!' The same story! The posts remained where they were placed, but that was all. Something, however, must be done before the next election. But how were they to fool the good citizens a third time? Then the prefect, who has no money to begin the work, conceived a superb idea. He sent for me, and said: 'You will paint those posts green!''

They all laughed at this ingenious idea; that is, the painter, Maurice and the valet, who was standing at a respectful distance. The corporal alone remained serious, wondering uneasily if this general hilarity were not an insult to the superior authorities.

"Consequently we are here to beg your permission to paint your posts green. Green is a very pretty color, and will suit the scenery," concluded the painter.

"And if I refuse?" said Maurice.

"Well, then, I shall be obliged to leave them as they are. Your neighbor, Madame Andrézy, paid me my day's wages and showed me the door."

"I will do the same," said Maurice. "Take this twenty-franc piece and show me your heels. My garden is surrounded by walls, and I am master here."

While the jolly painter walked slowly away, accompanied by the disconcerted corporal, Maurice wondered how he could take advantage of this incident. Did he not now have a pretext to call on his neighbor? Should they not have an understanding between them, that they might protect their rights as proprietors? Half an hour later, the well-trained Constant started for Les Audliettes, carrying a letter, in which M. de Fonde begged Madame Andrézy to grant him an interview. Huberte hastened to reply, by a very amiable, but slightly sarcastic note, saying that she would be at home until the middle of the afternoon.

"She is decidedly clever," thought Maurice, as he studied the note. These few lines indicate very clearly that she is not deceived by my stratagem. However, she consents to receive me. If her handwriting does not belie her, she must be of a determined character. Not at all timid, I should say!"

After breakfast, Maurice took a stroll, which ended at Les Audliettes. As he neared the villa, his heart beat somewhat faster, and, by a strange oddity, he was thinking less of Huberte than of Catherine. He admitted that his neighbor interested him less through herself than through her resemblance to the *other*.

A discreet-looking maid ushered Maurice into a spacious boudoir, with windows in full view of the Argente, and bathed in sunlight.

"Madame will be down in a few moments, and begs Monsieur to await her," she said as she withdrew.

The inhabitants of Arnay-le-Comte had reason enough to envy Mme. Andrézy's pretty villa. Maurice found himself transported into the coquettish apartment of a refined Parisian. He was admiring an exquisite picture by Henner, when Huberte entered.

"You are very kind to receive me, Madame," he said, bowing. "I intended to do myself the honor of calling on you in the course of the week; but a circumstance"—

The young woman interrupted him with a frank laugh.

"An urgent circumstance, is it not, Monsieur?" she said gaily.

Maurice was too much of a man of the world to feign any longer.

"I see that you have found me out," he replied, laughing. "You are not mistaken, Madame. When I met you yesterday, I admired you, as one always admires a lovely and intelligent woman."

Huberte did not even wince at this blunt compliment; but a warm light, scarcely perceptible, came into her dark eyes.

"You are too indulgent, Monsieur," she said, in that musical voice that so charmed Maurice. "Perhaps you would be less so, if you had heard people speak of me."

"I have already heard!"

"They lost no time!"

"Would you be astonished if I excused them? Since your arrival here, all the women must be dying of jealousy! You cannot be beautiful and graceful with impunity.

And, besides, you are a Parisian. A Parisian! Just think of it! How can provincial women forgive you such a dire crime?"

Huberte smiled, delighted at the young man's compliments.

"I will wager that you desired to know this '*Soif d'Egards*,' precisely because she was abused," she said archly.

"I admit it."

"Ah, well, Monsieur *mon voisin*, I shall be as frank as you. If I am delighted to please you, it is because you please me also."

"How lonesome you must be in this little own!"

"If I am lonesome!"

She pronounced these four words with so much conviction that Maurice laughed.

"You guessed at once that I was a Parisian," she continued. "Now explain what appears incomprehensible to me: How is it that a man like you exiles himself voluntarily in this forsaken country?"

"Oh! it is not voluntarily!"

"Love troubles?"

"Not that, either. My conduct is dictated by more prosaic motives. I have squandered three-fourths of my fortune."

"O! you poor man!" she murmured.

All this was said gaily, unceremoniously, like two comrades chatting at their ease.

And yet there was a shade of coquetry in this lively dialogue. They were trying to understand each other. Maurice, without naming anybody, cleverly sketched a few of the local physiognomies, and Huberte laughed heartily at his witty delineations.

"Now, I am going to make a flattering avowal," she said. "This is the first time I have the pleasure of conversing with a bright man since my arrival in Arnay-le-Comte, four years ago."

"Really, I do not weary you?"

"What conceit!"

"Then I shall venture to solicit a favor."

"Already?" she said archly.

"You are going out?"

"Yes. I take a ramble in the forest every day."

"Will you allow me to accompany you?"

For the second time a warm light came into Huberte's eyes.

"I consent cheerfully," she replied. "Only you will do me the pleasure of leaving me at once."

"Why?"

"You do not know the people! Should

anybody see us going out together, not only would I be lost, but, heavens! what a scandal it would create! It would be immediately proclaimed that you are here only for me."

"Where shall I find you, then?"

"Oh! that is very simple. Enter the forest by the same path you did yesterday. Ten minutes' walk will bring you to the middle of a glade. Sit down at the foot of a tree and wait for me."

They were standing near the window, under the brilliant rays of the sun. Maurice, more and more charmed, studied this lovely creature, with dazzling eyes and graceful figure. And again, it was not Huberte he saw, but Catherine. They exchanged a glance, one of those meaning glances in which a man and a woman say so many things. Then, bowing respectfully, Maurice took his leave.

What conflicting thoughts filled his brain as he directed his steps toward the forest!

Madame Andrézy completely bewitched him. Her grace and her beauty had captivated this sensual and sentimental Parisian. And the strangeness of this double adventure enchanted him by its odd phases. After meet-

ing Catherine in a railway carriage, he met Huberte in a ramble. It was the same woman, *and yet they were two!* The young man analyzed himself thoroughly, endeavoring to read within himself. He admitted that he who, two days ago, had been ready to love Catherine with his heart, now desired Huberte with his senses. For he had judged the one and the other at a glance. Both similar, yet both dissimilar. The first haughty, the second unreserved. The first proud, as a great lady who knows her worth and feels herself above vulgar adorations; the second, a good-natured girl, who loved pleasure and was ready to take it wherever it could be found.



VIII.

It was a delicious day. The spring smiled through the shivering leaves, caressed by a cool breeze. After wandering through the forest for some time, Huberte and Maurice seated themselves under a natural grove of oaks and beech trees. The young woman spoke softly, relating the small incidents of her daily life, while she idly plucked tufts of grass. Oh! it was a very simple existence! She never went out of her villa but to return some visit and to take her morning walk. Five or six times a year, she gave a big dinner-party, to acknowledge the invitations she had received.

“You have but few distractions indeed,” he said, smiling. “I now understand why you should take pleasure in going to Dijon every week.”

She started as if this simple phrase had been a blow in her face. Maurice then knew of this apparently insignificant detail? What could it be to him? She adroitly changed the subject of conversation by questioning him on his Parisian habits; for Huberte carefully avoided speaking of herself. He had the good taste not to notice her embarrassment, and jested pleasantly over his former follies. And Mme. Andrézy affected a great curiosity concerning that gay world, which she knew only through books and newspapers. She laughed boisterously, though a little nervously, when Maurice related his farewell scene with Clotilde Véronèse. This presentation of the future husband seemed very comical to her. Then her merriment was quickly succeeded by a fit of melancholy that was too sudden not to be affected. But the cleverest men are always a dupe to these little comedies played by a woman. They sometimes distrust sincerity; never hypocrisy.

“You see, I laughed at your anecdote,” she rejoined, with a sigh. “Yet, when I think it over, it seems sad to me. To think that a man as intelligent and distinguished as you, should become the toy of a girl.”

At this moment a blackbird, perched on one of the branches that sheltered the young people, began to whistle. Maurice did not hear the blackbird, but he understood Madame Andrézy's allusive phrase. Those few words meant, in plain French: "Ah! my dear Monsieur, it is not such girls that give happiness. At best, it is an easily won pleasure, which is worth but little. There are in this world accomplished women, ill-used by fate, and who—" And the blackbird still whistled! "The warbling of the blackbird," says Buffon, a solemn gentleman, "is very sweet, very melodious, but a little sad, as must be the song of all birds living in solitude." With all due respect to the pompous naturalist, the warbling of the blackbird, on this particular afternoon, was neither sweet, melodious, nor sad. Mocking though; oh! yes, very mocking! But it may, perhaps, have belonged to that race of pink blackbirds of which Aldovrande speaks, and whose presence announces grave events.

A man and a woman, when chatting on love, never find the time long. The human creature is such an egotist. Each brings into the conversation the recollection of personal adventures. The one thinks: "What a

wretch!" The other: "What a traitor!" And all goes for the best, until the two interlocutors feel the desire of re-commencing a new experience.

Maurice spoke a great deal of himself; Huberte, not at all of herself. This reserve, or modesty, piqued the young man. He finally asked a few such direct questions that she was obliged to answer. But with what dexterity! He was enlightened on one point, however; she had a sister, and this sister's name was Catherine. Besides, she said a few vague words about the departed M. Andrézy; and how many allusions were contained in these vague words! He had scarcely been a husband to her! Such delicate health! Such weak lungs!

Maurice was not astonished at this song. The air was very familiar to him. The Parisian recognized the device common to certain women. They are married? Never, oh! never does the husband claim his rights. They are widows? He was an invalid, or dissipated, or—

Why should love be perpetually burlesqued by ruses or vilified by falsehood?

A purple shadow descended from the mountain. The sadness of twilight enveloped the

young people. They were now silent, absorbed in thoughts. Huberte suddenly burst into a gay laugh.

"We are becoming mournful, my dear neighbor," she said. "Let us beware; that gains on one."

"You are adorable!" he murmured softly.

"Thanks for the compliment. I take it for what it is worth. But let us talk of something else. Exchanging souvenirs is not a gay pastime."

"You are right. Souvenirs are always sad; they resemble the sands of the rivers. The gold-seekers find therein more mud than precious metal."

There was another short silence; then she remarked, in a playful tone:

"In any case you are a charming companion, and I thank you for our pleasant stroll."

"Flatterer!"

"No, I mean it. It would be a pity to spoil the rest of the day by spending it alone. Will you come and dine with me?"

"I shall be delighted!"

Mme. Andrézy again laughed joyously.

"Do not be surprised at my gaiety," she said. "I am thinking of the scandal that would burst in Arnay-le-Comte, if they suspected what we are doing."

"Heavens! what crime have we committed?" Maurice exclaimed, in mock alarm.

"We have amused ourselves, and that is high treason in the province. And in secret, too! Not taking into account that I would be horribly compromised! Just imagine: you called on me early in the day; we went walking together; and, to crown all, I have the audacity to invite you to dine with me."

Mme. Andrézy showed herself quite expert in the arrangement of little details. She advised Maurice to go to the town immediately, and to stroll on the Cours, where everybody could see him. After that he must return home and remain there until night. And, above all, he must not be guilty of the imprudence of coming to Les Audliettes by the high road. No, he must simply follow the sinuous course of the Argente, being careful to keep in sight the famous posts that were to be painted green. The last of these posts stood beside a small gate that opened into Mme. Andrézy's garden.

"And now, my dear neighbor," she concluded, "I must run away. I have given you full directions; if you make a mistake, it will be your own fault."

She made a pretty little curtsey, as grace-

ful as it was ironical. Then, with the quick movement of a frightened fawn, she disappeared through one of the paths in the forest, leaving Maurice under the spell of her beauty.

The young woman's wit and humor fascinated him. He was charmed by her supple and undulating form, by the dazzling whiteness of her complexion, by the brightness of her black eyes with reflections of a sapphire hue. He did not realize that this fascination came less from her than from the *other*. Maurice was enamored of Huberte because he remembered Catherine. But a man in love can no longer analyze his sentiments. And again the Parisian weaved an odd romance, in which Catherine and Huberte played undefined parts. Would he love the first and be the lover of the second, or would he be the lover of both?

Time passes quickly in pleasant reveries. And what more agreeable thoughts can there be for a man of thirty, in whom chastity is not the dominating virtue? Nevertheless, he did not forget to obey Mme. Andrézy's orders. On the Cours, Maurice had the good fortune to meet, one after the other, Mme. Poppleton, the curé, the president of the tribunal and Mme. Balivet-Lamothe. As Con-

stant had that very morning carried his master's card to each of these high personages, Maurice had a pleasant word with everybody.

Without knowing it, Maurice had just committed an act of great independence. He might, perhaps, have never suspected it; but the abbé, taking compassion on the naïveté of his parishioner, was careful to inform him of it a few days later. What! no distinction between the friends of the government and the people of the opposition! The same smile for both crowds! No difference between these and those! General opinion, however, remained favorable to the Parisian. But because he was a Parisian. No one but a son of that lost city would so scandalously exhibit such contempt for social proprieties.

A little before seven o'clock, Maurice started homeward. As soon as he found himself once more alone, he resumed his reverie. What welcome did the pretty Huberte reserve for him? Notwithstanding his confidence, he did not dare promise himself an immediate success. Madame Andrézy, if only through calculation and prudence, would not yield so soon. And still! No matter, the evening would certainly be delightful. One can re-

ceive a great deal from a woman without obtaining—all.

Night had now closed. The road was so dark that he could scarcely see two meters before him. And, luckily, the moon obstinately concealed itself behind a thick curtain of clouds. Maurice dressed hastily and went out. Then, descending to the bank of the river, he ventured on, not without some hesitation, however. Fortunately the famous posts guided his nocturnal walk. The electoral railway was at last of some use.



IX

What a charming dinner! Huberte wore the toilet of a coquette, who is determined to conquer at any price. A toilet of somewhat questionable taste; but exciting, original, and more in the style of a tea-gown than of an evening dress. It was of light blue surah, with a profusion of white lace. The sleeves were yellow, as were also the silk stockings, which were half concealed by blue slippers of the same shade as the dress. A slight opening revealed the whiteness of a well-rounded throat. The material seemed molded to the form, and displayed every curve of the graceful figure: It was enough to intoxicate a reasonable man; and Maurice had never shone by his reason. He had guessed a-right: Huberte was pleased with him. Not daring to admit the fancy he inspired, she allowed him to guess it.

Maurice was not conceited. It is only idiots that imagine themselves adored by all women; and Maurice was by no means an idiot. After all, why should not Mme. Andrézy take a fancy for an unexpected distraction? She must be very lonesome in this morose country place, where fate condemned her to vegetate. The toilet, the smiles, the words, the allusions, all had a very clear meaning, and no one but an imbecile could have failed to understand. When he had come to this conclusion, Maurice almost immediately changed his manners. His seriousness became gaiety; his conversation, until now half reserved, became bold to joyousness, if not to impropriety. By degrees, he forgot that he was dining with a society woman. Even the surroundings contributed to the illusion. The dazzling silver and crystals, in which were reflected the rays of the lamp and candles, the excellence of the wine, the delicacy of the dishes, recalled those gay Parisian suppers, where pleasure rather than love comes smiling with the dessert.

“Ah! yes, I am very lonesome here,” repeated Madame Andrézy. “I am bored to death. You ask why I remain here? Search, *mon beau Monsieur!*”

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brilliant, and she spoke with animation.

"Search—search! Do you know that is not very easy, my pretty lady? Being a widow, you are free. Being rich, you are independent. Therefore, no one has the right to compel you to remain in this little town."

Huberte hesitated. Perhaps Maurice was beginning to see too clearly and too deep. So assuming a sudden gravity she said:

"I might answer that there is a mystery in my life. But no, I will be more frank. In my husband's time I possessed a large fortune. In losing him, I lost two-thirds of my income, and had only my dowry left. To tell the truth, I have my little vanities like most women, and I could not bear to be pitied by my friends. Everything is relative after all. What is a fortune for this one, is actual want for that one."

The explanation seemed probable enough, and Maurice could easily believe that Madame Andrézy was telling the truth. Her history was thus the very counterpart of his own.

"But never mind the past," she said, suddenly, with that nervous, forced laugh, which is the great resource of an embarrassed

woman. "Let us think of the present. I owe you a charming day and a charming evening. Have you dined well, at least, my dear guest?"

They had already suppressed the ceremonious "Monsieur" and "Madame." When a man and a woman are pleased with each other, they have quite a choice of appellations before brutally resorting to their first names.

Huberte leaned on her companion's arm to return to the drawing-room. As soon as they were seated, she rang for the coffee and liquors. When the servant had brought them, she said, quietly:

"You may retire, Germain; if I need your services I shall ring."

This meant that she was not to be disturbed.

"Now, make yourself comfortable," she said to Maurice. "You may smoke; and I am going to set you the example."

As she spoke, she daintily lighted an Egyptian cigarette, and came and stood before the young man, adding:

"I dismissed the servant that I might have the pleasure of waiting on you myself."

They now spoke in a low voice, almost in a whisper. Her head slightly bowed, Mme.

Andrézy listened with a pleasure she did not attempt to conceal.

“You are the most bewitching creature I ever met,” murmured Maurice, leaning towards her. “Just fancy; before I knew you I imagined that I did not like brunettes. I was really guilty of that blasphemy. I will not tell you that you are pretty; it would be but a commonplace stupidity. You are—you are worse. I adore changing eyes like yours; those eyes sometimes black, sometimes blue, in which thought is so well reflected.”

She was still smiling; silent, with half opened lips, as if drinking in these words. Maurice was already opening his arms to clasp her. She arose abruptly and seated herself at the piano.

“You will make me lose my wits,” she cried, with a smile that revealed her pretty teeth. “You are not behaving yourself. I will punish you with some music.”

She played charmingly; not at all with the talent of an amateur. After one of Chopin's waltzes, she commenced the first measures of the Swan Song in Lohengrin. Maurice came softly behind her, and, bending down, he kissed her on the neck, with a long, tender kiss. Huberte uttered a low cry, and fell

back trembling, her head supported by the young man's arm. Disengaging himself, he kneeled and clasped her hands caressingly.

"I love you!" he murmured.

She shook her head mockingly, but in reality she was much agitated.

"So soon!" she whispered softly.

"That is the reason. Love once born, grows quickly."

"Love!—oh, love!"

She did not finish her thought, but he read it in the eyes that looked into his own; no longer dazzling, but filled with tenderness. Tenderness and desire manifest themselves by the very same expression of the face.

"I love you!" he repeated a second time.

Was it the truth of the moment? Or was it that, seeing this adorable creature ready to give herself to him, his thoughts recurred to Catherine, whom he could not banish from his mind and heart? Huberte murmured a few vague words. Then, as Maurice clasped her into his arms, she added, in an almost unintelligible voice:

"Ah! yes—love me—If you only knew—!"

X.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. Maurice had just awakened; having returned home only in the middle of the night. His slumber had been filled with enchanting dreams. He sincerely believed that he loved Huberte for Huberte's own sake. Whether he loved her or not, he considered himself very happy. His exile now appeared in delightful colors. How could he have imagined that he should meet such a woman in the depths of Morvan? Once or twice, however, he had a rapid vision of the *other*, and a regret pierced his heart.

But it was important that he should not awaken suspicion. He, therefore, exhibited himself to the principal personages of the little town. He was seen in turn at the club and in Mme. Balivet-Lamothe's villa.

Then as he left Mme. de Mathivon's drawing-room he hastened to present himself at Mme. Poppleton's. He was just in time to hear them speak of Mme. Andrézy.

"Come quick, my dear Monsieur," cried the fat Rosalie, as Maurice entered. We are just talking about *Soif-d'Esards*."

"And what about her, Madame?" he said, carelessly.

"Madame Pernette and myself fear she must be ill."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, she did not go to Dijon."

Maurice no longer had to affect surprise, as he did not understand a word. Why should they think Huberte ill because she had not left Arnay-le-Comte? Happily, with Mme. Poppleton, necessary explanations were always forthcoming.

"True enough, my dear Monsieur; you are not aware that Madame Andrézy goes every week to spend two days at Dijon, with one of her friends, Madame Couturier, whom she visits regularly——"

And she went on, giving precise details! Huberte always left on Saturday afternoon, and returned on Monday morning. This Madame Couturier must be very old or an

invalid, for she had never come to Arnay-le-Comte. At any rate, she lived a very retired life. The sous-préfet had questioned the secretary who had been told by the commissaire de police, that no one in Dijon received Madame Andrézy's friend, and, beside, she was never seen at the theater.

Maurice listened with nervous attention. This interminable prating did interest him, after all. At the end of half an hour, he took his leave. Was he, by chance, about to decipher the enigma of the sphinx? He walked on toward Charmoises, lost in thought. These weekly voyages, so punctually made by Huberte, evidently concealed a secret. But what could this secret be? Maurice remembered how she had started, and how confused she had looked, when he alluded to the matter in her presence. Why? And now these matrons remarked that Huberte had departed from her usual habits. And when? The very next day after their night of love.

Maurice could not help connecting the second circumstance with the first. He was not one of those idiots who scorn a woman because she has given herself, neither was he one of those blockheads who judge her badly because

she has given herself too quickly. Is it not Octave Feuillet who says, in *M. de Camors*: "The fall of a virtuous woman is often of a rapidity that amazes." No, nothing of all this influenced him. Only he found something suspicious in Huberte's manners. Why did her sister live in Paris, while she buried herself in the province? Why did Madame Andrézy, being a widow and rich, endure this unendurable existence? Finally, why did she suddenly discontinue her weekly pilgrimages?

While he turned all these thoughts in his mind, Maurice had reached the château. Seven o'clock was striking. He had barely time to dress and rejoin Huberte; for they were to dine together as on the previous day. They were both sure of the discretion of their servants.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, as he entered his room. "How stupid I am to harbor such chimerical anxieties. I have an adorable mistress; I must accept her as she is, without looking for the whys and wherefores."

Easily said; but one does not appease the tumult of the brain at will. Whether he willed or no, Maurice felt his anxieties and suspicions increase. When he had finished

dressing, he feverishly took the path to Les Audliettes.

Madame Andrézy received him in the same toilet as on the previous evening. As she leaned affectionately toward him, he seized her hands and looking straight into her eyes, said abruptly:

"You did not go on your visit to Madame Couturier today?"

She turned pale and shrunk back.

"I have just left Madame Poppleton's house. This change in your usual habits has excited the curiosity of those busy-bodies—"

He did not finish. A deep sadness—not at all simulated—suddenly clouded the young woman's face. She sank into a chair without a word, gazing vaguely before her as if sinking into a profound meditation.

"You do not answer me?" cried Maurice angrily.

"What do you want me to answer?" she replied. "You know nothing of my life, further than that I love you and have proved it. And it is on leaving my arms that you listen to those ridiculous gossips! You suspect me? Of what? You surely do not blame me for yielding to you so quickly."



Had I been a deceiver or a coquette, would I have acted as I did?"

Huberte was evidently sincere. Her dejected and reproachful tone expressed profound bitterness. Maurice was touched and regretted his hasty suspicions. Seating himself beside her, he said tenderly:

"I was in the wrong. Foolish thoughts traversed my brain. Forgive me."

"Forgive you?—Already!—"

Just then dinner was announced, and Huberte changed the conversation. The two lovers took their seats at the table, but with very different dispositions from the preceding evening. Mme. Andrézy, so gay, so lively, twenty-four hours before, now seemed dull and disenchanted. He, realizing his blunder, was angrily accusing himself of stupidity. What folly to quarrel with this charming woman, and without tangible motive, on a mere suspicion unsupported by any proof! He exerted himself to amuse and distract her, to draw her out of her melancholy gloom. She smiled faintly, and answered by monosyllables. At last the meal was over. They were once more alone, and free from curious eyes. Maurice fell on his knees before the young woman, and kissed her hands with caressing tenderness.

“ You said you had forgiven me. Then why are you not yourself again ? ” he said pleadingly.

“ Because I can not.”

“ Huberte ! ”

She looked at him long. Then, as if it cost her an effort to evoke the past, she answered in a husky voice :

“ Listen ! I have many faults, but there is one at least that I have never had : that is dissimulation. Falsehood is repugnant to me. There was a moment when a lie might have changed the whole course of my life. But I could not utter it. I am too frank. Well, I demand the same frankness from you. What ! you are silent ? ”

“ It is—it is because I do not understand.”

“ You understand very well,” she said indignantly. And with a burst of supreme bitterness she cried violently : “ Ah ! men !—traitors, often—false, always ! ”

She had risen, and with folded arms she went on imperiously :

“ You came to me two hours ago, your heart full of distrust and suspicions. Heavens ! of what did you not accuse me in your mind ! And yet, I have nothing to reproach myself with towards you. I have a right to

know what thoughts have been working in your brain; how you could so quickly have scorned a woman who had given herself up so loyally to your love and to your honor!"

These clear cutting words moved Maurice. Huberte spoke with vehement frankness. Impossible to deny her almost brutal sincerity.

"You want my confession?" he replied.

"Very well. I will conceal nothing."

And he told her all. How her charm and beauty had fascinated him at their first meeting; how his unreasonable suspicions, as absurd as they were inexplicable had been brought into existence. And finally, how the idle gossips of the little town had added to his personal conjectures. What he dared not avow, however, was that his distrust sprung from his meeting with Catherine. Why did one of the sisters live amid the splendors of Parisian life, while the other was buried in the obscurity of a provincial life?

"If I understand you right," she replied, "you are convinced that I harbor a secret. According to you, it is not from choice that I am living here, in this obscure region, but from an imperious necessity. You see me

rich, free, a widow, and you cannot understand why I submit to an existence for which I am not fitted. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"Over and above these suspicions of yours, have been piled up all those calumnies, and all those falsehoods. And I become capable of everything! Criminal because I inhabit Arnay-le-Comte; criminal because I am envied, hated; criminal because I have fallen in love with you!"

"Huberte!"

"Ah, well! no. You have not told me all! You are clever and intelligent. You are a loyal man. Therefore, your suspicions would be idiotic were they not aroused by a circumstance of which I am ignorant."

Maurice hesitated. Madame Andrézy's decisiveness inspired him with an instinctive deference.

"It is true," he said.

"Then frankness for frankness! I will reveal to you what you are ignorant of in my life; and you shall reveal to me what has caused you to judge me thus."

"On my honor!"

There was a short silence. Then Huberte came nearer to him and looked into his face.

"I am not a widow," she began.

He started.

"My husband is living," she continued.

"We are separated. The separation was pronounced against me. But why relate the drama? Not only did I not lie, but I even accused myself to save my lover's life!"

And as Maurice seemed stupefied by this audacious sincerity, she added, with a bitter laugh:

"And I was well rewarded for my sacrifice! But let that pass. And now for you. Everybody here told you that my conduct was irreproachable. Why did you not believe it? Why were you convinced that my past——"

"Because I had already seen you before I saw you. In leaving Paris, I traveled with a young woman who was you without being yourself——"

"Catherine! You know Catherine!" she exclaimed, in stupefaction.

And, without giving Maurice time for reflection, she threw her arms around him, violently, ardently.

"Now, do you believe that I love you?" she cried. "Now that I have confessed my grievous error!"

A cooler man than he would have been

disconcerted by the unexpected and abrupt changes of this feminine character. It is not, therefore, surprising that so passionate a being as Maurice, who analyzed but sentiment, should have succumbed to the sensation. How could he now distrust Huberte? Had she not just spoken with brutal clearness? And yet an obscure thought was reflected in that woman's eyes—a thought that Maurice could neither understand nor guess. At the very moment when she seemed most loving, she was thinking:

“Catherine again! Always Catherine! Must I forever encounter her in my path!”



XI.

During the two weeks that followed this strange scene, Huberte intoxicated her lover with love and delights. This fascinating woman seemed to be endeavoring to change the fancy she had inspired into a durable love. Playful, caressing, passionate, she revealed herself a new mistress at each rendezvous, like that mistress, never the same, whom Balzac crudely calls "the seraglio woman." Maurice gave himself up without suspicion. Little by little, she related all that she could relate of her past life.

The twin sisters, Huberte, and Catherine Desrozières, were left orphans at the age of fifteen. Rich in beauty, they married on the same day. The former with a Bordeaux banker, M. Garlin-Rueil; the latter with a Parisian clubman, M. de Vrède, an idler who

gaily spent the income of a considerable fortune. M. de Vrède's father and grandfather had been among the most important vine-growers of the Charente.

M. Garlin-Rueil belonged to one of those old Catholic families which bequeath, as a precious inheritance to each successive generation, an old royalist patronage, as constant in their habits as in their beliefs. The treachery of one of his wife's friends had disclosed her unfaithfulness. To avoid a duel, Huberte admitted her guilt; knowing that the young cavalry officer to whom she had sacrificed all, would have allowed himself to be killed rather than defend himself. Between public shame and secret dishonor, the banker did not hesitate. He applied for a legal separation, which he easily obtained, as Mme. Garlin-Rueil did not deny anything. She did not even make a pretense of defending herself.

Huberte confessed all this, little by little, knowing that Maurice would love her all the more for it. But however frank she may be, has not a mistress always some mental restrictions? Furthermore, the young woman praised her sister, Mme. de Vrède, in the highest terms. She told her lover that, thanks

to Catherine, M. Garlin-Rueil's resentment was lessened. After much urging, he had consented to pay his unfaithful wife a large pension, on condition, however, that she assume another name and retire to a small provincial town. That was why Huberte lived in Arnay-le-Comte under the name of Mme. Andrézy. Maurice was on the point of asking her motive for choosing this little town of the Côte-d'Or, but she anticipated the question. The bishop of Evreux, who was the banker's cousin, was also a friend of the Abbé Mingral. The episcopal recommendation procured the priest's protection for the exile. And, thanks to him, Huberte was welcomed everywhere.

When he had learned this history in all its details, Maurice reproached himself severely for his own conduct in having mistrusted such a straightforward woman! All that was obscure was now explained. Women do not always appreciate the value of frankness. In admitting the known errors, they prevent the suspicion of secret faults. A slave to his temperament, Maurice passed almost without transition from extreme distrust to absolute credulity. Mme. Andrézy had had a lover. But this error was ennobled by the

loyalty of her confession. The young man admitted that his mistress might have remained silent. No one could have recognized Mme. Garlin-Rueil under the name of Mme. Andrézy. In speaking out, in mitigating nothing, she appeared in a noble rôle.

Huberte quickly perceived the empire she had acquired over the young man. Being very clever and of a sharpened intelligence, she immediately understood that her bold manoeuvre had fully succeeded. Maurice belonged to her; he belonged wholly to her. Where is credulous man, who, having misunderstood a woman, does not strive for pardon! Had the Parisian been less dominated by the exaltation of his senses, he would have observed Mme. Andrézy's character with more exactitude. He would have seen that she was frank, but also very crafty. He would have seen that she foresaw everything, and neglected nothing. And what tact she displayed in the way she planned their common existence!

An intrigue, so easily carried on in Paris, is a very different matter in the province. Those poor women! A hundred Argus eyes are always open, watching this one, spying on that one. There are Madame Poppletons everywhere!

Huberte constructed a very skilful plan. By her advice, Maurice suddenly assumed mourning for a cousin who had never existed. One fine morning the "notables" of Arnay-le-Comte received a card with a broad black border. M. de Fonde was announcing to his friends and acquaintances "the cruel loss he had just experienced in the person of M. Stephane de Richaud, etc., etc." The composition of this circular had given the two lovers a great deal of amusement.

"Poor cousin Stephane," said Huberte; "let us not make him die too young!"

"Will seventy do?"

"Not enough. He must be an octogenarian. Otherwise my conscience will trouble me."

For forty-eight hours Maurice was forced to submit to the words of condolence of this one and that one. There was a perfect avalanche of "Dear Monsieur! Oh! how much we sympathize with you," and the inevitable phrase: "Life contains many cruel trials." This imaginary mourning permitted Maurice to live in strict retirement. He slept late, as much through habits of laziness as to rest from the fatigue of his nocturnal visits. In the afternoon he went out on horseback, and

dined in some distant tavern. The village notary, M. Balivet-Lamothe, and Mme. Pernette had met him in turn at the four points of the compass.

When he returned homeward, at about 10 o'clock, silence and darkness enveloped the place. Madame Andrézy, on her side, occupied "society" so well that nobody suspected her secret intrigue. She showed herself everywhere, and redoubled in her politeness toward everybody. This adroit and skilful woman knew the weaknesses of her neighbors. They loved to dine at other people's houses, through gluttony as well as through economy; and Mme. Andrézy was an excellent hostess. Twice a week she opened her doors to her friends, and kept almost open table. It was a very decorous meal, presided over by the abbé, during which deep religious thoughts were exchanged, between occasional thrusts at one's neighbors. How far these slanders might have gone, had it not been for the presence of the venerable priest, whose simple and austere life commanded the respect of all, no one can say.

In a few weeks, Huberte regained all her lost ground. The name of *Soif-d'Egards* was dropped. It was now considered very bad taste to use that nick-name. And what

happiness for the young woman to again meet her lover after these pious love-feasts! Maurice's kisses seemed sweeter and more spicy after the monotonous evening. About midnight, the young man prudently locked his bed-room door, and softly descended to the garden. Huberte awaited him behind the little gate, enveloped in a large cloak, and both glided quietly into the villa.

They thus avoided all gossip. Even the servants knew nothing. Sometimes, in those beautiful summer nights, the two lovers rambled in the forest, dreaming of their love, taking for the confidantes of their passion the large glades bathed in the diamond rays of the moon. But they did not often venture on these nocturnal escapades, fearing to be seen on their return by some early peasant. This purely sensual passion absorbed Maurice. This new mistress resembled in nothing the mistresses of his past life. Huberte's love was sincere, and she reigned supreme in this liaison, which a chance meeting had formed and which chance also was to dissolve.

One night Maurice found Mme. Andrézy thoughtful and preoccupied. A fugitive sadness clouded her pretty face, and a strange nervousness agitated her.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Oh! nothing," she replied, making the response that never varies and which serves all women.

Nevertheless, she did not recover her vanished gaiety. But a few days later she confided the cause of her secret sorrow to Maurice. Madame Couturier, her Dijon friend, was very ill and complained bitterly of Huberte's neglect. She had that very morning received a very distressing letter.

"Why not go then, *mon amie*?"

"What! leave you?"

"Since it cannot be helped."

"I shall never have the courage."

"Think of the poor creature."

How often a man makes himself ridiculous at a woman's pleasure. His mistress desires one thing, but absolutely refuses to accept it. It is he who then insists. It is he who invents pretexts and searches for excuses! And yet, a woman never laughs at the man she ridicules by her natural artfulness, sharpened by education. After numerous struggles, Maurice at last had the happiness of convincing her that she must go. It was decided that Mme. Andrézy should be absent forty-eight hours. But how unhappy the thought made her appear.

“Just think of it, my friend,” she said sadly. “I am depriving myself of you for two whole days. And of my own free will, too! Oh! how lonesome I shall be in that city.”

They separated at last, but with very sad hearts. After all, the separation would not be interminable, and when it is a question of duty—In certain circumstances it is considered good taste to use certain words. Those words never change; they seem to have become sacred by their very stupidity.

Maurice resigned himself quietly enough. Purely sensual love is easily consoled. Once back in Charmoises, he reasoned that, after this short absence, their meeting would be all the sweeter. The next day, however, seemed long and monotonous. After a stroll in the forest, he walked slowly to the town. But the distractions of a game of whist at fifty centimes did not dissipate his gloom. Had it not been for his good-breeding, Maurice would have yawned in his partner's face. The only pleasure he tasted was his lonely dinner at the club. But how was he to spend the evening? Huberte was to leave early the next morning, and they had agreed not to see each other again.

The man who truly loves, dreams with delight of the hours too rapidly flown away. The remembrance of his happiness is as dear to him as the presence of the woman he adores. This was not the case with Maurice; he continued to be lonesome; that was all. Suddenly an idea came to him, dictated less by the desire of seeing Huberte than by the wish to amuse himself. Why should he not join her there? Of course, he could not be seen anywhere with her; but she would know he was near, and would be grateful for the attention.

First of all he must be careful to avoid the envenomed gossip which their simultaneous departure might occasion. Why not go on horseback in the middle of the night? It would be delightful on this warm, moon-lit summer night, in the grand silence of the slumbering fields.

XII.

Certain naive persons imagine that we acquire experience in love. What a mistake! We are like the engineer on his locomotive. He directs this monster of brass and steel, and he knows its abrupt shocks. His itinerary never varies; his experienced eye watches to the right and left, ever on the alert for a turning signal or a changing light. And yet there are accidents. We can never avoid what can not be foreseen.

A passion resembles a train rushing at full speed. When a man is enamored of a woman, whether it be with the senses or with the heart, he can analyze her sentiments. He may have confidence in her, or he may mistrust her; but he does not possess the gift of second sight, and can not imagine the impossible or improbable.

On his arrival at Dijon, Maurice went straight to the hotel and had his horse stabled. A true horseman always sees to the wants of his horse before he thinks of himself. After a few hours' sleep, he awoke refreshed and sprightly; and his lively imagination turned to reverie. Huberte would soon arrive. Why not go to meet her?

His windows opened on a large courtyard, shaded with trees. Maurice was on the point of ringing for a servant, when the sound of voices and repeated calls attracted his attention. Mechanically, he raised the curtain and looked out. A landau was entering the courtyard, and in this landau was Mme. Andrézy in an exquisite summer toilet.

"She must have feared the great heat of the day," he thought, "and started earlier than she intended."

So much the better; the surprise would be all the sweeter. How delighted she would be to see him! He was giving her one of those proofs of affection that are so welcome because unexpected. He snatched his hat and hurried down. When he reached the *Place Darcy*, which extends to the entrance of the city, he was astonished to find that

Mme. Andrézy had already gone. The young woman, with a heavy veil over her face, was walking with a rapid, almost nervous step. Why did she now conceal her face? There was no air of mystery in her arrival a few minutes before.

Dijon is a pretty town; and *Messieurs les officiers* do not dread it at all. A young cavalry officer was standing idly, no doubt admiring the sculptured beauties of the *Porte Guillaume*; he was examining it with rapt attention, from top to bottom. This attention, however, ceased abruptly as Huberte approached. He turned quickly, and came toward the young woman, képi in hand, with a manner at once polite and assured.

"Oh! oh!" muttered Maurice.

He would not have been surprised to see his mistress accosted by an old woman; for the excellent Mme. Couturier must be old. But this lieutenant, with his elegant figure and pointed moustaches, stupefied him. Yet, it was scarcely stupefaction. Was it not rather that vague sentiment of uneasiness which takes a tenacious hold on us when we feel very near being ridiculed?

Madame Andrézy and the young officer seemed to know each other very well; for

they conversed with animation as they went down the Rue Guillaume, while Maurice followed, not ten meters behind, the very picture of misery. He followed without any definite idea of what he would do. This unforeseen event fairly took his breath away. He had expected anything but this indecent and brutal denouement. Still escorted by her cavalier (cavalier in more than one sense), Huberte traversed half of the city, and turned into the Rue de la Chaise. They stopped at the second house, and Maurice saw them discreetly disappear, while the door was quickly closed behind them.

The Rue de la Chaise begins at the Cathedral square; and this square, which is much frequented at night, has a café and a restaurant. M. de Fonde saw that by entering this restaurant he would not lose sight of the mysterious house. So a few minutes later, the young man found himself seated on a velvet sofa, where he could reflect at his ease on the fragility of human love. Had he loved Huberte with his heart—with that veritable love which ennobles humanity—Maurice would have imagined a thousand suppositions before accusing his mistress. Madame Couturier might have a son or a



nephew, whom she had sent to meet her young friend. Sensual love, which is not elevated by an ideal, is punished by its own baseness. It does not know the delicious anguish of doubt. It accuses at once, because there is not one atom of esteem in its composition. And no human affection can live unless continually nurtured by respect.

Besides, an instinct cried the truth to Maurice. The dupe of a coquette? No, Huberte had never been a coquette with him. But he was the dupe of a corrupted, sensual and vicious woman. A little patience, and all would be settled forever. He would wait a few hours; and when he supposed Madame Andrézy alone—just then, his eyes caught sight of a large white card on the house of the Rue de la Chaise, on which he distinguished the words, "*For sale or to let.*"

"There! there!" he muttered.

And calling the waiter he sent him in quest of the proprietor. The honest man came hurriedly in response to his customer's request, with that affability which is customary to the Bourguignon.

"Monsieur," said Maurice, without preamble, "I desire to rent a house in Dijon, and that card over there attracted my attention. Can you give me any information?"

"Certainly, Monsieur. The house will soon be vacant. It is now occupied by Madame Couturier, an elderly lady, who takes care of it for her mistress. This young lady lives in the country, and I have never heard her name. She comes every week to Dijon and orders her meals from here."

The Bourguignon spoke in that sing-song tone of his compatriots. He was discreet, and did not say one word too much; but the sarcastic smile that puckered his lips meant all that he left unsaid. Then he added, good-naturedly, that the young lady had not been there for quite a while. "She would probably not remain long this time, as Madame Couturier had not ordered her breakfast as usual."

But Maurice no longer listened. The door of the house opened abruptly. The lieutenant came out hurriedly, looking very much displeased. He was biting his mustache, and appeared quite vexed. Maurice arose.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "Since the owner is in the city to-day, I will try to come to some understanding with her."

And without haste or affectation, he quietly walked out. In a few seconds he reached the mysterious asylum in which Mme. An-

drézy hid her weekly escapade. The bell resounded through the house; the door was half-opened by a timid and aged servant, who appeared very much taken back when she saw Maurice. At this moment Huberte's voice was heard from the floor above.

"What is it, Marie?" she asked. "I told you I would receive no one."

Guided by the voice, Maurice quickly ascended the stairs, and found himself face to face with Mme. Andrézy, who was leaning over the banister.

"You receive no one, my dear madame," he said in a jeering tone, as he bowed gallantly. "Then you did not expect me!"

She uttered a shriek and recoiled, frightened, to the wall. A door at the left opened into a large room, elegantly furnished in Venetian brocade, and with heavy curtains, through which only a discreet light penetrated.

"I shall walk right in, since you do not invite me!" he continued, still smiling and keeping up his bantering tone. "Oh! what a pretty room! You must show me through your apartments. This is the boudoir, I suppose, and that the bed-room and dressing room. All of exquisite taste. Allow me to congratulate you!"

Huberte had followed him, terrified and bewildered. By what miracle was Maurice there? What hazard brought him to this house, which she believed was secret to everybody? He had quietly seated himself, with the calm assurance of a man master of himself. He took a silver case from his pocket, and added, ironically :

“I do not ask your permission ; I know—by experience—that you love cigarettes, and that the smoke does not annoy you !”

She was looking at him. This calm, this ease, frightened her. She would rather have seen him in a rage, in a frenzy, even if she were the victim.

“Yes—I know—you are astonished,” he resumed, between the puffs of smoke. “I will explain. It is very simple—oh ! indeed, very simple. I could not guess that you would find in Dijon such charming—distractions. Pray, excuse me ; one cannot foresee everything. So I conceived the idea of giving you a surprise. You must admit that the surprise is greater than might have been expected ! You spoke of your *ennui* when you came to visit your good friend, Madame Couturier. Apropos, this Madame Couturier looks very well as a cavalry officer.

The blue uniform becomes her wonderfully well. Pray accept my compliments!"

M. de Fonde stopped a moment to light another cigarette. He took pleasure in distilling his sarcastic words, drop by drop. It was such fine pastime! Huberte, white and trembling, remained standing, motionless, with fixed gaze.

"I therefore resolved not to leave you here alone," resumed Maurice. "I left Arnay-le-Comte during the night, and reached this place only a few hours before you. You alighted from your carriage at the hotel, and—"

Huberte gave a hoarse moan, and fell on her knees, burying her face in her hands.

"Say no more—oh! say no more—" she stammered.

"What, my dear madame, does not this little story interest you? You are difficult to please. I find it very amusing."

Huberte arose, slowly and painfully, clutching at the furniture. She was playing no comedy. Her livid features, distorted by a nervous contraction, expressed her despair. After all, Maurice was not a cruel man. Whatever this woman might be, he had been her lover. He could not be blind to her acute

suffering. She who was unworthy of pardon, perhaps merited pity.

"You ask me to say no more?" he rejoined. "Why not? We must have an explanation, sooner or later. It might better be now. You suffer—I see it well. Ah! then, give me one excuse—one only. I ask no more."

"Ah! if I had one, would I not have already hurled it at you?" she cried, passionately. Then in a husky voice, she added: "I deny nothing. I told you I never lied. I will tell you all. All! do you hear? Then—oh! then, you may think of me what you will! When my husband condemned me to a life of solitude in Arnay-le-Comte, he who had been my ruin asked for an exchange of garrison. He was sent to Dijon. And then—and then, it is the eternal story! His family, terrified by the scandal in Bordeaux, feared a liaison that would be enduring. They urged him to marry, and he obeyed!"

Madame Andrézy spoke with an effort; the words choked in her throat.

"We dishonor ourselves for a man: this is how he repays us! We had a confidant, one of his comrades in the regiment. He courted me—I was alone—unoccupied—perhaps I felt the instinctive need of revenging myself.

And I did not realize that my revenge degraded me, without punishing him. You can guess the rest. This had lasted one year when I met you."

She clasped her hands, and went on, in a broken voice:

"I swear it, Maurice, you are the only man I ever loved! I abandoned myself to the passion I felt for you, with delight. You resemble others so little! Your love—was my repose, my joy, my consolation! From the day I belonged to you, did I ever leave Arnay-le-Comte, did I come to this place? Unfortunately, that man whom you saw a little while ago, pursued me with letters. Letters of entreaty and of menace. Why should I so obstinately insist on breaking off? Why not see him again? He said so much that I determined to end it all. He remained scarcely an hour. And as he forgot himself so far as to speak to me without the respect due to a woman, I drove him away, banished him ignominiously."

Maurice had listened in silence. Huberte was not lying. Her voice, husky at first, had become more animated as she proceeded, and the color had returned to her livid cheeks.

"That may be," he replied. "I believe you. The man who caused your ruin loved you enough to wish to be near you, at least. But the second? Explain! Anger, idleness, self-forgetfulness, need of vengeance? These reasons were not sufficient, for your liaison outlasted them, since you retained this house, since you came every week for a whole year!"

The argument was irrefutable. Besides, he was not a man to revenge himself with words; neither was she a woman to accept them. Huberte became Huberte once more. Seeing herself lost, judged, condemned, she audaciously threw herself forward, as she always did.

"You men are extraordinary!" she cried, with a painful, bitter laugh. "You are permitted everything; we nothing! Was I not dying of *ennui* over there? Have I not said so a hundred times? Then I am young, ardent—I have blood in my veins! What could have restrained me? Self respect? I have none left! The fear of disgrace? A whole city dragged me in the mire! Ah! what wild ideas haunted my brain during the long evenings in that little villa! Yes, I retained that lover; yes, I re-

tained him without, without tenderness——”

Again, an abrupt change came over her. She threw herself on her knees for the second time. Big tears flowed down her cheeks; and, in accents of entreaty and supplication, she cried:

“But at least I did not deceive *you*! I know that all is over between us; that you scorn and, perhaps, hate me. But say that you will believe me? Yes, you will believe me, for I have no interest in deceiving you. Beside, why should I? I have loved you; I love you still! I ask but one thing: think of me, from time to time, as you would think of a girl whom you had honored with a caprice.”

Her sobs choked her.

Huberte's last words touched Maurice's heart. All was indeed over between them, but the unfortunate woman's distress pained him. Some men cannot bear to see a woman weep. After all, whatever reproaches she deserved, he could neither accuse her of falsehood nor of dissimulation. She had told all, clearly, plainly, pushing frankness to cynicism. Controlling himself, in spite of his emotion, he extended his hand and raised her. She attempted to throw herself on his

breast; but he gently held her back, and seated her on a sofa.

"I admit all that I can admit in what you said," he replied, after a short pause. "I believe you. I sincerely think you incapable of falsehood."

"Ah!"

"I will only remember the delightful hours that I owe you, and that souvenir alone will survive in my heart. You were not a coquette; you did not feign your affection for me. Men always keep a tender recollection of women who have brought happy days into their existence."

It was decreed that these two beings should not understand each other. In hearing these sweet words, shaded with a vague tenderness, Huberte shuddered and arose, violently.

"And this is all you have to answer me?" she cried.

"What else can I say?"

"Words of farewell, formal phrases!"

As she said these words, she seized his hands with a passion that amazed Maurice, and added, vehemently:

"Then you do not hate me?"

"I pity you."

She burst into a laugh—a laugh that grated on his ears; and in a hollow voice she hurled this phrase, which would have been unexplainable if, in women, all that is passion were not incomprehensible.

“If you do not hate me, it is because you never loved me!”

And before Maurice could utter a word, she crossed the boudoir, opened the door and disappeared.

8 Her Sister's Rival



XIII.

A man deceived by his mistress sometimes suffers in his heart, but oftener in his vanity. With Maurice, however, it was different. To begin with, he knew he was loved. And then, the deceived party in the affair was the lieutenant, not himself!

M. de Fonde dined copiously and with appetite, sprinkling his repast with good wine. He did not trouble himself about Madame Andrézy. What did he care, after all? His moonlight ride had pleased him, and he resolved to recommence this capricious run in the coolness of the coming night. In fact his adventure ended as it should. Maurice knew women too well to form any illusions concerning Huberte. From the first hour, he had foreseen the inevitable issue of

this liaison. The denouement came sooner than he expected; that was all.

When he reached Charmoises, he went to bed with a light heart, and slept peacefully until morning. The course of his thoughts did not change until he awakened.

"Hum!" he thought, not without a shade of false shame. "I must now accustom myself to solitude. I must admit it: that pretty woman was an agreeable neighbor!"

Once started in this mood, the young man did not readily stop. After breakfast, he went out on the terrace to smoke in the open air and to continue his reverie. He recalled Madame Andrézy's charms with a shudder of desire. What bright intelligence, and what captivating beauty!

"Decidedly, I am an idiot. What difference did it make to me whether she had or had not a lover at Dijon. I have made a mess of it, as Traville would say. I should have found out the truth, so as not to be deceived; and once convinced, I should have feigned ignorance. Then, when satiety came, I could have used the adventure as a pretext to break-off."

This course of reasoning was not very chivalrous; but sensual men are not heroes.

Thanks to pretty Huberte, Maurice had been fortunate enough to find an un hoped-for distraction. What would he do, now that this distraction was taken away? He was forced to admit that in the country, idlers are exposed to die from *ennui*. When he came to Charmoises, the Parisian intended to work. Had he not vine-yards, forests and fields? If necessary he would imitate one of his neighbors, who was building a distillery at Jouey, not far from Arnay-le-Comte. How amusement it would be to create a new industry! Unfortunately Maurice's knowledge of business was limited to horses. Hitherto, he had raced, and that cost him money. Ah! well, he would now try breeding, which brings money.

The young man owned a part of the fertile prairie extending along the Argente. In a few days he would lay out a number of paddocks, carefully distanced. As a first outlay he would spend 50,000 francs; not more. Four breeding mares at 8,000 francs apiece, one stallion at 15,000; this was all that was required. It was useless to procure a numerous staff. A head man is glad to obtain a hundred and fifty louis in wages. By doubling this sum he could place two or

three lads under his orders, as he intended to lodge them in the château. The affair would certainly be successful. In five or six years he could without difficulty dispose of a half dozen colts on the market. This would be clear profit. Beside, he did not ask to make money, but merely not to lose any.

The rapidly conceived project was rapidly adopted. Maurice spent the first part of the day in figuring. Then he visited the meadows where he was to locate the paddocks. Suddenly he stopped short, as he caught a glimpse of Madame Andrézy's villa behind the trees. And then mares, paddocks and lads soon flew out of his mind.

What had become of Huberte? Of what was she thinking? Had she returned? A woman's heart is so odd! Are not those strange creatures in perpetual contradiction with themselves? Maurice recalled their abrupt separation; knowing her to be ardent, passionate, eager for vengeance, she might have remained at Dijon. The cavalry officer asked for nothing better than to be forgiven. And then——

Maurice passed ten very disagreeable minutes. Even if not jealous, a man feels none the less annoyed at the thought that

another—While reasoning thus, Maurice was nearing Les Audliettes; he was dying of the desire to know, and nothing prevented him from calling on his neighbor. Such a step might be in doubtful taste; but what of it? To this first idea: “I shall go to see her,” a second was soon added: “If I were to renew my *liaison* with her?” The transition was very natural. And why not? No doubt the first interview would be embarrassing, but by playing a forgiving role, he could manage it quite well. As to the young woman, she would become the repentent Magdalen. Not in the Desert, though! But with the hope of re-recommencing!

Having finished this fine imagining, Maurice threw himself at the foot of a tree to dream at his ease.

“What I am about to do is not very chic,” he thought. “But then, I am not a Scipio Africanus, and I would wager that any of my club companions would do the same. And then, so much the worse for women. They are no more the dupes of our falsehoods than we are of their artful tricks.”

His remorse being appeased, Maurice resumed his way to Les Audliettes. His heart beat fast as he passed the little door through

which he had hitherto entered his self-created paradise. Although sensual love may be of inferior essence, it is nevertheless one of the forms of love, and perhaps the most delicious. Sensuality, however, knows the pangs of jealousy—and stands but little contradiction! As the great Spinoza says: “He who remembers the mistress who once charmed him, desires to have her his again, and in the same circumstances. His appetite is inflamed by the thought that another experiences the same desires.”

A surprise awaited Maurice. He was greeted by a mysterious smile from Huberte's maid, Julia. This pretty and pert wench was not in ignorance of her mistress' secrets.

“Monsieur will be much astonished,” she said; “Madame is not here.”

“She is still at Dijon?”

Again an enigmatic smile came to Julia's lips. M. de Fonde seemed so much concerned that she was amused. She so well knew the ins and outs of the situation!

“Oh! no, Monsieur! Madame received a very grave despatch from Bordeaux. I may relate the story to Monsieur, for it is no secret, since Madame left the open despatch behind her.”

She took a blue paper from the table and offered it to Maurice. The message contained these few words: "Henri very ill; desires to see you; come at once." It was easily understood: M. Garlin-Rueil was in danger, and wished to see his wife before dying.

"Thanks, my child," he said, handing back the message. "Be kind enough to let me know when your mistress returns -if she returns."

"Oh! Monsieur may count on me!"

Maurice left, apparently indifferent, but in reality much vexed at this unexpected *dénouement*.



XIV

M. de Fonde was dining at Mme. Poppleton's that evening. The abbé, the President of the tribunal, Mme. Pernette and the Comtesse de Mathivon were among the guests. The latter belonged to the tribe of Cocusses, which form a legion in l'Autunois and the south of the Côte-d'Or. She made many enemies by her premeditated impertinences, and a malicious functionary conceived the idea of making a classified list of the Cocusses. It was as follows: 1 Cocusse notary, 4 Cocusses grocers, 9 Cocusses wine merchants, 1 Cocusse mid-wife. This mid-wife caused much fun among the Arnaisians, who are peaceful people, and easily amused. Jests were frequent on this subject. And when a small town laughs at a joke, an adventure, a raillery, or a pun, it is repeated

to satiety. This papal Comtesse, though forty, still retained her former pretensions. While she resided at Dijon, the officers had not found her very cruel; and her gay past prevented her from being indulgent toward her neighbors. Women, who have amused themselves a great deal, never forgive others the grief they feel in growing old.

Physically, she resembled a *gendarme* masquerading in female attire. Tall, strong, imperious, Madame de Mathivon was not yet disarmed. There still remained vestiges of coquetry from her former loveintrigues, which made her thirst for admiration. So the Comtesse wore a red wig, and painted her eyebrows. But her wig always fluttered from right to left like the wing of a partridge, and her eye-brows were invariably traced too high or too low, and never at the same place.

"Well!" she exclaimed, as she tasted her soup, "it seems that *Soif-d'Egards* has suddenly left!"

"She has gone to rejoin—Henri!" declared M. Lecarnet, president of the tribunal, with a knowing air.

"Ah! yes, the Henri of the dispatch."

Whence came the indiscretion? From the

employes of the telegraph or from Julia. In the province, one never knows. The most mysterious news circulates rapidly; and everybody jumps at it like carps at bread crumbs.

"As you are her neighbor, M. de Fonde," said Mme. Poppleton, "you must know when she left."

"Indeed I do not, madame. I presented myself at Les Audliettes to pay my respects to Madamé Andrézy, a few hours ago, and it was then I learned of her departure."

"It is astonishing that you were not more intimate," observed the Comtesse, maliciously.

"On the contrary, madame, there is nothing astonishing about it," retorted Maurice, drily. "Madame Andrézy is young and pretty; and by showing her the least attention I should have compromised her."

"Oh! what a big word!"

"A correct word. You are not merciful, mesdames les Arnaisiennes; and I am not sorry to find the opportunity of saying so. We men pass for great gossips, in our club; but we utter less slander in a month than you do in twenty-four hours."

"Bravo, my dear child!" cried the abbé.

There was a murmur of approbation. Madame de Mathivon was so cordially detested.

"Do not caluminate us, Monsieur de Fonde!" she said in her *gendarme* voice, as she flushed with anger. "You will soon imitate us. I wager that before six weeks you will speak ill of me."

"Of you, madame? I am sure that I will not."

"Indeed?"

"Certainly not, since I have had the honor of dining in your house."

"That suffices you?"

"When I have broken bread, and eaten salt at a person's table, that person is sacred to me."

"Like the Arabs? How charming! M. de Fonde is quite poetic."

"I do not know if I am poetic, but I am sure I am not malicious!"

The retorts might have become more envenomed, but the abbé hastened to change the conversation. After dinner, a mild game of poker was organized; this agreeable game has penetrated even the most distant provinces of France.

About 10 o'clock, Maurice arose to take

his leave. Before retiring he approached the abbé and said in a low voice, that no one could hear :

“ Monsieur le Curé, can you receive me to-morrow morning? ”

“ Certainly ! ”

“ At what time? ”

“ Come at eleven, and breakfast with me. I promise you some fine Argente trout, as you love it—*a la meuniere!* ”

“ I accept, Monsieur le Curé. As much for you as for the trout ! ”

And the young man went out, yawning and in bad humor, discontented with himself and with everybody else. How unfortunate that Huberte should be absent! He would have joined her with keen pleasure, at this moment! This thought led him into a reverie that lasted until he fell asleep. The next morning he sat down to a gay breakfast with the *curé*.

“ You have then a grave secret to impart to me? ” asked the ecclesiastic, smiling.

“ Grave—no. I merely want to explain the cause of my departure,” replied Maurice.

The *abbé* burst into a merry laugh.

“ What was my prediction when you first came? With your character and more especially with your Parisian habits——”

“Pardon me, if I interrupt you, *Monsieur le Curé*. I am not leaving Arnay-le-Comte with the intention of not returning. What I have missed until now, is a serious occupation. Well, I have found one; but I will explain my projects by-and-bye. Now what terrifies me is the summer. Ah! if you knew what thoughts came to me yesterday at Madame Poppleton’s dinner! Just to think! each evening to hear the same jests, the same puns, the same petty slander! To play that intolerable poker with the same intolerable people! Never. I fly! When I return, in the middle of October, my arrangements will be made. I shall then be busy all day; and as I shall rise with the sun, I will go to bed early. And I can then do without the inhabitants of this little town. You will look around the country for an honest girl; it matters not if she be without a sou of dowry, only I want her pretty enough that I may love her. Then I shall marry her. I will try to have many children, and make them good christians and good Frenchmen. This is the sum total of my ambitions.”

“You are an honest-hearted fellow, my dear Maurice,” said the *abbé*, with emotion,

as he extended his hand. "All is well when we place our trust in God. You told me on your arrival here that you were not the same as in the old days. It is true: you are better. Now explain the work you are going to undertake."

In a few words, Maurice told his intentions. *Abbé* Mingral knew too little of sporting matters to approve or disapprove of his plans. It sufficed, however, that he chose some kind of respectable occupation for him to please the worthy man. Before Maurice left, he was treated to a little lecture on his private habits; but with much mildness, almost with tenderness. It was thus that this remarkable man, who recalled the Saints of the early Church, went through life, doing good. He so well deserved respect, that even the adversaries of his belief always spoke of him with veneration. Unfortunates never left the pastor's manse without being somewhat reconciled to existence; and the uneasy, tormented, nervous ones, such as Maurice, in leaving his presence, carried away that intellectual and moral repose inspired by the serenity of a noble soul, superior to all vulgar human passions.

XV.

The season at Aix-en-Savoie is at its height during the months of August and September. Were bathers alone to visit this resort, the place would be as dull as Le Mont-Dore or Royat. But *cocottes*, gamblers, and people in search of pleasure also flock there in great number. Thus one finds the two well defined camps: the invalids who go to the bath, and the gamblers who go to the baccara. Strangers who come merely to enjoy an admirable climate and a delicious country, form a category apart. M. de Fonde belonged to this class; he wanted distractions and chose Aix-en-Savoie.

The first thing we do on our arrival at a thermal station is to search right and left for friends, or even simple acquaintances, who may have preceded us.

"Pshaw!" mused Maurice, "why should I bother myself. I am in a first-class hotel, and will soon find somebody to talk with."

He was far from thinking he had guessed so well.

The young man occupied a large room on the ground floor, which opened directly into a pretty and inviting garden. As the heat was suffocating, he stepped out into this garden to breathe a little pure air before breakfast. Suddenly he caught sight of a young woman seated on a bench and bending over a child, seven or eight years of age, who was stretched in a small carriage.

"An elegant figure," he thought.

He took a few steps toward her, and turned his head to look at her. He stopped short, in stupefaction, stifling a cry that rose to his lips. It was Catherine! Why he did not say, "It is Huberte!" he never knew. Without hesitation, he walked straight to Mme. de Vréde, and bowed respectfully.

"I believe you do not recognize me, madame," he said. "I arrived only yesterday. I meet you now, in this place, for the first time, and hasten to present my homage."

Catherine turned her eyes on him at the

first words. Her face was pale, and she seemed sad.

"I remember you very well, monsieur," she replied, with a slight inclination of the head. "We were traveling companions, for a short distance, three months ago."

"Then, madame, since you do me the honor of remembering me, allow me to give you my name: Maurice de Fonde, a retired Parisian, at present a provincial. If Monsieur de Vréde is at Aix, I shall be happy to be presented to him. If you are alone here, pray consider me your most humble servant."

Catherine had started. How came this stranger to know her name? It was only after the lapse of a few moments that Maurice perceived his blunder. As he was determined, however, not to lose this opportunity, he again bowed politely, and seated himself on the bench beside the young woman.

"Your son is ill, madame?" he said lowering his voice.

She cast a long tender glance on the child, who was listening, gazing at the stranger with his large, intelligent, dreamy eyes; those soft eyes filled with melancholy and regret, which we see in those poor beings doomed to early death.

"The dear child has rheumatism. The physicians assure me that the waters of Aix will cure him. You are not suffering just now, my darling?"

"No, mamma. I am very well to-day."

"And you will be still better when you leave this place, my little Jacques," said Maurice gently.

Mme. de Vrède again started in surprise. Not only did this young man know her own name, but that of the child. Maurice had allowed his first imprudence to pass unnoticed; he now attempted to explain the second.

"A few words will dissipate your surprise, madame, he said. When you entered the railway carriage in Paris, where I had the honor of meeting you, Monsieur de Vrède accompanied you. As he was leaving, you said: "Take good care of Jacques." And he answered: "Have no fear."

Impossible to express a sentiment with more cleverness. A man chances to meet a woman in a railway-carriage, and converses with her for an hour. Three months later a new hazard places this man in that woman's path; and the former has not forgotten the words of the latter. The least

coquetish woman in the world, the most frank and upright, could not help being flattered by such a delicate compliment. M. de Fonde again bowed to Mme. de Vréde, smiled to the child, who had not removed his eyes from him, and walked away.

How changed she was! How she must have suffered in that short time! Maurice again found himself in the same state of mind as on the hour when Catherine left him at Joigny. This short conversation had not lasted a quarter of an hour; and yet those few minutes sufficed him to note the difference which existed between the twin sisters. Huberte was as beautiful, as shapely, as intellectual as Catherine. But what a strange phenomenon! Both absolutely alike, physically; yet both absolutely dissimilar, morally. The first, inspiring one with the boldest thoughts of love; the second, calling forth nothing but thoughts of the most reserved respect. The one, sensual, the other, chaste; the one, living by the senses, the other, living by the heart. And yet nature, by a mysterious caprice, had created striking similitudes between them, outside of the exterior resemblance. Thus both were equally frank, sincere, ardent, incapable of falsehood or dissimulation.

A traveler relates that in Japan, in the province of To-Kai-do, which is bathed by the Oriental sea, there exist two herbs, scarcely distinguishable one from the other. One field produces fine, light straw, which the natives weave into delicate baskets; while the twin field beside it produces the grain from which is extracted the saki, a violent liquor which crazes the drinker.

Immediately after breakfast, Maurice visited the town shops and chose the toys which would be most amusing to a child of Jacques' age. He had them sent to the hotel with his card. He resolved within himself that he would search for no occasion to meet Catherine. That noble woman inspired him with such respect, that by acting otherwise he would have believed himself guilty of offending the idol he venerated in secret. The next day, however, he went down into the garden at the same hour as on the previous day. A surprise awaited him. Jacques was there, but with his mother's maid.

"Good morning, Jacques," said the young man, as he approached. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Still better, monsieur," said the little invalid, a smile lighting up his pale face.

"Thank you very much for your toys; it was kind of you to send them."

"Were you pleased with them?"

"Very much."

"I am delighted. You must ask me for whatever may please you."

"If I dared—"

"Dare, my dear child," said Maurice, encouragingly.

Jacques again smiled. He was really a very pretty child, notwithstanding his poor little emaciated face, which was lighted up by large black eyes, like those of his mother.

"Oh! I know why everybody spoils me," he rejoined, quickly; "it is because I am not well, because I am forced to be quiet. They wish to recompense me. I don't deserve it, though, for if I could I would be as noisy as the others."

"When you are cured, you can make up for lost time," said Maurice, laughing.

"Do you think so. But you told me to ask for what I wished. When mamma is with me—and mama is always with me—she tells me stories—"

"I understand! You want—"

"Ah! yes, do—mamma started early this morning for Lyons. They say there is a

great doctor there. She wrote for him, but he never came. So she has gone after him."

"Ah! well, never mind. I will try to take your mother's place in the story-telling business. Only, I am afraid I shall not be as interesting."

Maurice had never troubled himself to find out whether or not he possessed any imagination. It is a quality quite unnecessary to people who devote themselves to pleasure. He was, therefore, much surprised with the ease which he was able to display in his improvisation. At first, his childhood recollections served him in good stead. Then one who travels a great deal, gathers legends here and there, which are stored in one's memory. Jacques was so pleased with his new friend that he urged him to come to his mother's apartments during the day. It was hardly correct. But the maid, a dull Swiss, did not dare raise any objections, knowing that the child's whims were always obeyed. Maurice promised Jacques that he would accede to his wishes, and kept his word.

Was he acting thus to impress Mme. de Vrède in his favor? No, indeed. He instinctively loved the child, on account of his mother. Besides, the contact of a superior

woman, such as Catherine, immediately elevates the morals and ideas of a man. There may also have been contrary impulses, impossible to analyze, conflicting in his mind. He remained with Jacques the greater part of the day. Madame de Vréde was to return for dinner, and Maurice had the tact to withdraw in time to avoid meeting her. And how happy he had been in that little hotel boudoir, relating stories to the child! He neither saw the gloomy walls, nor the common-place furniture. The absent Catherine was present and near.

At the accustomed hour the next day, Madame de Vréde went down into the garden, where she had met Maurice two days before. As she caught sight of him, she came straight to him, with extended hand.

"How kind you are, yes, how kind you are!" she exclaimed.

"Oh! madame!—"

"Do not excuse yourself! When a man loves children, it is because he is really good. And when he remains good after the life you have led, it is because he is excellent!"

He smiled at these words, which contained a somewhat harsh criticism: "After the life you have led."

Madame de Vréde saw his smile, and was too quick not to understand it.

"I am wrong," she said. "I must apologize in my turn. But I am very happy to-day. I succeeded in bringing Doctor Jamette with me from Lyons, and he is not alarmed at Jacques' state of health. Do you understand my joy?"

She was standing before Maurice, who was contemplating her with ecstasy. Catherine's first distrust had disappeared. M. de Fonde now pleased the woman, because he had touched the heart of the mother.



XVI.

Although the physicians ordered plenty of mountain air for Jacques, he was forbidden to walk. He went out every morning after breakfast in his little carriage, pushed by the maid, and escorted by the mother and M. de Fonde. At first, Madame de Vréde might perhaps have dispensed with Maurice; but Jacques claimed his friend with so much earnestness that he had to be obeyed. In this daily intimacy, the young man appeared at his best—kind, intellectual and affectionate. Little by little he related his history to his new friend; it was a very ordinary and commonplace history, but one which was not unfavorable to him. He concealed but one period of his life: his recent sojourn at Arnay-le-Comte. He would reveal the truth later on, he thought. Why should he now trouble this feminine imagination?



Catherine, on her side, admitted that Maurice's companionship was a precious resource. The poor woman had few distractions. To overlook the treatment of her son, and to follow him in his daily outings, were her only amusements during the day. In the evening, at nine o'clock, the child went to sleep. Formerly, after that hour, she had remained alone, but now Maurice had become her faithful attendant. They often went down into the garden, forgetful of all in their long conversations. Sometimes they even followed the path to the lake, or entered a carriage and ascended the hills in search of fresh air. Both seemed to voluntarily avoid any allusion to love. Catherine understood his sentiments, but the virtue of this noble woman was so exalted, that it inspired him with an inviolable respect. In her heart she admitted that this discreet and silent love pleased her more than she could have believed possible. She was happy to feel herself treated as an idol. Who could have imagined that this frivolous Parisian, this habitué of *coulisses* and *petits boudoirs*, could maintain such perfect conduct?

She gradually became bolder. She re-

sponded to Maurice's confidences by speaking of her past. But she never alluded to her girlhood; she only spoke sadly of a beloved sister, whom fatality condemned to live far away from her. As to the rest, oh! it was a painful and lamentable story! A vicious, corrupted, libertine husband, who spent his life in gambling houses, and paid but little attention to his wife. Maurice listened, divided between two contrary sentiments: sad, because she was so unhappy; delighted because she did not love her husband. Her heart was free! Many causes united to cloud this apparently brilliant existence. Jacques had been born strong and healthy, but he had contracted rheumatism at an early age. The family physician had advised a long season at Aix-en-Savoie; and Mme. de Vréde was forced to undertake the sole care of the boy, as her husband could not be induced to leave his pleasures.

For the first time in his life, Maurice truly loved a woman, with none but noble thoughts in his mind, and with an elevated ideal in his heart. Proud beings, such as she was, impart a little of themselves to those who approach them. Moreover, she exer-

cised a particular fascination over this young man. It sufficed him to recall the beauties of his former mistress, to divine those of the twin sister. Just by closing his eyes, he again saw the elegant, graceful form of Madame Andrézy—that supple shape, with its firm and pure lines. It was, therefore, as if he knew Catherine physically. To him, she had thus the attraction of the unknown, and the charm of the already known.

These relations existed for a couple of weeks, when one morning the Swiss maid came to M. de Fonde's door, with a message from Madame de Vréde, requesting him to come to her apartments.

"What is it?" he asked, anxiously, as he saw Catherine, so pale and wan from the fatigues of a sleepless night.

"Jacques is ill," she said, sadly.

"And you are troubled?"

"I am wild. Last night I could not sleep, and I heard him moan. I arose and hurried to his bedside. He looked at me with his eyes full of tears, clinching his teeth as he always does when in pain. I immediately sent for the doctor."

"Can I be of any use to you. I am entirely at your service."

She pressed his hand gently.

"I will not attempt to thank you; you have spoiled me. Stay with Jacques. Your stories are new for him, and amuse him better than mine."

The poor child was suffering from an acute attack of muscular rheumatism. He was enduring atrocious pains, and burning with fever. Mme de Vrède remained in the sick room all day, and Maurice refused to leave her.

"My friend, you must go for a walk," she said about four o'clock. I do not want you to be a victim of your devotion."

"Very well," he assented. "I will consent to leave you for an hour, but on one condition. When I return, you must also go out."

"Leave Jacques!"

"I beseech you, do not make useless sacrifices. I am enough your friend to have the right to make a request; if need be, to give an order. We must arrange matters that we may be with the child in turns. It would not do for both of us to be ill."

"You are right."

She had called him "my friend!" These two words sounded delicious in his ears. While he thoughtfully followed the road to

Marlioz, Maurice wondered if more cruel trials were not in store for Catherine. After the consultation, the physician had appeared, if not anxious, at least troubled. What then did this wise Lyonnais mean, with his reassuring statement? Maurice returned to the hotel, rested and refreshed by his walk. Obediently following his advice, Madame de Vrède started out in her turn. She felt tranquil since she was leaving Jacques under such vigilant care. As she entered the room, on her return, Maurice made her a sign to walk softly.

"He is asleep," he whispered, "and I have left him with the maid. Come into the parlor, I want to speak to you."

When they were alone, he added:

"I feel that you have confidence in me; I thank you, and assure you that it is not misplaced. I love that child because he is yours. It is important that we should not leave him, so I propose these arrangements: After dinner I shall go to bed and sleep until midnight. Then I will assume the care of him while you take the necessary rest."

Catherine looked at him with grateful eyes. He thought of everything, with the careful foresight of the heart which had given

itself forever. Did not the phrase, "I love that child because he is yours," contain the most delicate and charming of avowals?

The next day Jacques was worse. The fever had increased, and his limbs were swollen. During the third night, he became delirious. He moaned and cried, complaining that a painful oppression prevented him from breathing. The young mother was awakened by the cries, and dressing hastily, she joined Maurice.

"My darling, my darling," she cried in despair. "It is I, your mother. Do you not know me?"

Jacques fixed his haggard eyes on his mother—those wild eyes from which consciousness had fled. Overcome by despair, Catherine burst into tears. In vain did Maurice try to comfort her; the unhappy mother only shook her head wildly.

"This is too much—yes, this is too much!" she cried. "I have always suffered, always! Unhappy as a young girl, since I was an orphan; unhappy as a sister, since she who should have been my best friend was jealous of me and hated me. Unhappy as a wife! And now heaven strikes me in my dearest affections."

Her tears changed into sobs. Suddenly Jacques' moans ceased. The child recognized his mother, and extended his little arms to her.

"Oh! mamma, mamma," he cried, "if you knew how I suffer."

Little by little, however, the pains lessened, and he fell into a sleep that lasted the rest of the night. When the doctor called in the morning, he was much surprised at the change. There was no more fever, scarcely any rheumatic pains. He dared not tell the delighted mother all he thought. Was it a symptom of recovery, or simply a halt in the disease? Catherine could scarcely believe in her happiness. How could she have imagined that her troubles and sorrows could thus vanish in a moment? She again became smiling and gay.

"It is you who bring me good fortune," she said to Maurice, as she pressed his hand.

He felt a thrill. The touch of the white skin went through him.

"You exaggerate, madame," he replied. "I merely tried to give you good advice. Now, here is my plan: Jacques is asleep; the poor child is so weak that he will probably sleep until night. Let us take advantage of this

opportunity. We shall breakfast together, and then go for a long walk in the mountains."

"Very well, I agree. But come at once; I am dying of hunger," she retorted gaily.

An hour later, they started out together, under the brightness of a sunlit sky. Mme. de Vrède was no longer the same woman. Her companion saw in her a new creature, whom he did not yet know. During the first days, she had mistrusted him; how could she have been outspoken and confidential? Then, when this distrust had melted away, Catherine had found herself a mother, and nothing but a mother.

She spoke in a sweet voice, admiring the scenery with the naive enthusiasm of a child. When his eyes met hers, he saw that they shone with an expression of infinite tenderness, and he contemplated her, charmed and thrilled. As they reached the summit of the hillock, Catherine stopped, dazzled by the sight that met her eyes.

"How beautiful!" she murmured.

Before them arose the mountains of Savoie, with their rugged indentations outlined against the sky; and below, the lake of Bourget, with its green and blue waters.

They seated themselves on a stone bench, protected from the ardent rays of the sun by the tall trees, whose leaves were already tinged by autumn.

"Indeed, I despaired too soon," she resumed in her musical voice. "I am now full of hope. Thanks to you, who have consoled and comforted me. I believe that nothing will now delay Jacques' convalescence. In a few weeks he will terminate his treatment here, and I shall take him home, cured and full of strength. And you, my friend, what will you do?"

"Why—what I have done until now," he replied. "Are you not alone? Did you not say that I was your only friend? When you leave Aix, I shall leave also. You will, I trust, permit me to see you in Paris?"

There was a short silence. Catherine was gazing before her, motionless, as if pursuing a fugitive thought into space. At last, slowly turning toward Maurice, she said:

"Did you not tell me the other day that you had abandoned Paris to live in the country?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, I want you to leave Aix-en-Savoie. It will be impossible for me to see you in Paris."

"Impossible! Why?"

"Because you love me, and because I love you!" she said, her eyes still fixed on him.

"Catherine!" he cried.

Madame de Vrède seemed transfigured.

"I have sworn before God to be a faithful wife," she said. "I am not released from my oath because he whose name I bear has proved faithless. I have the right to love you, because I am not the mistress of my heart. But having told you, my duty is to fly!"

Maurice now understood. This loyal creature was afraid; afraid of herself, and of him. Too frank to hide her sentiments, but also too pure not to fear the peril. He buried his face in his hands.

"You will suffer, Maurice," she resumed. "I shall also! Let us not regret this suffering; we owe it to what is best in us. I might have kept back my confession; nothing obliged me to make it. But it would not have been worthy of me! I knew that the thought that an invisible link united us forever, would be sweet to you. And now let us go! I have your promise?"

"Yes."

"From this day, the life that we lead must cease."

“Oh! only from to-morrow! I beseech you, give me until to-morrow!” he pleaded.

“Yes, I consent. It may be so long before we meet again!”

They were standing, clasping each other's hands. He, trembling with emotion; she, calm and smiling.

“I love you,” she said, for the second time. “You have all that is best in me! My heart and my thoughts—I give them to you!”

On their way homeward, they spoke on indifferent topics; but their hearts were filled with a sweet and poignant emotion. She had revealed her secret, and found the man whom she regarded above all others, worthy of her. They would suffer! Well, so much the better. Suffering alone ennobles humanity, and Tourguéneff had reason to cry: “O, my beloved pain!” Delicate souls delight in tasting the bitter joys of sacrifice. They know what trials await them; they know also that they possess the strength to bear and conquer them.

When they reached the hotel, they separated with a single pressure of the hand. What more could they have said? Catherine went to her room almost happy; Mau-

rice belonged to her entirely. She had admitted her love; and he had quietly submitted to her will. One day more and he would go, never to see her again. He would live far away from her, notwithstanding the passion that consumed him!

As he reached the door of his small parlor, a waiter informed him that a lady awaited him.

"A lady?" he repeated, in amazement.

"Yes, monsieur. She called early, and returned again ten minutes ago."

"Who in the deuce can it be?" thought Maurice.

He opened the door and uttered a cry of stupefaction. Huberte was calmly seated in an arm-chair, smiling, head erect, impertinent and mocking.



XVII.

“ Well, yes, my dear, here I am. Do I disturb you ? ” she said coolly.

He looked at her without answering. Why was she there ? What hazard, or rather, what fatality brought her to this watering place, a few steps from Catherine ? For the idea had not yet occurred to the young man, that any correlation could exist between the presence of the one and the in-coming of the other. He who believes he knows women best, is doomed to never understand them. And how can we fathom those complicated and complex creatures, who are truly sincere in their flights of passion only ?

Seeing his surprise and amazement, Huberte burst into a laugh ; that wicked laugh that annoys, and jars upon the nerves.

“ My presence here astonishes you ? ” she

said. "Oh! I understand it very well! You are asking yourself what I can be doing here? Well, I will explain. As you already know, my husband was very ill; and believing himself lost, the poor man wanted to see me once more. Bah! it was only a false alarm. Those professing Catholics are all alike! On his death-bed, he experienced the need of a reconciliation with me; but as soon as the danger passed away, he ordered me back into my exile. When I reached Les Audliettes, I learned that you had been there to see me. How charming! It was really very amiable on your part. I had imagined so many things! Oh! things that I will not tell you, because they would only make you shrug your shoulders."

Maurice had gradually recovered his composure. By instinct, he knew there would be a struggle. He now examined Huberte with more calmness. She was standing before him, pretty and captivating as ever, with a diabolical light in her black eyes, and a sarcasm on her lips; ironical and haughty, as if being mistress of the situation, she wanted her former lover to suffer for the humiliations she had endured.

"All this does not explain your presence in Aix-en-Savoie," observed Maurice, endeavoring to appear indifferent.

“True—but don’t be in such a hurry! I’ll tell you all in good time,” she said with an insolent laugh, hoping to draw him out of his phlegmatic attitude.

“I am not in a hurry, and I am not curious,” he replied coldly. “I did choose this watering place to spend a few weeks, out of pure caprice. You have had the same whim, I suppose? You find me delighted.”

“Delighted? Really? But I will resume my little story. Knowing that you had come to Les Audliettes, I naturally inferred from such a step that I was not indifferent to you. That’s silly, is it not? I immediately sent Julia to Charmoises to have a little conversation with Constant. They understand each other very well. Have you remarked that servants nearly always follow their masters’ propensities? Only, sometimes their masters quarrel, while they remain good friends. I thus learned that you were here. Then, fool that I was, I took the first train to join you here. And I arrived last week.”

“Last week!” he cried, aghast.

“Exactly. Oh! the charming surprise that awaited me! I find you intimate with whom? With my sister! My nephew is taken ill? You immediately assume the role of nurse!

You remain with Jacques to tell him baby stories. It is so touching, that it actually brings tears into my eyes!"

She arose, coming nearer to Maurice, and added cynically:

"How long have you been my sister Catherine's lover?"

"You lie!" he cried angrily, losing all self-control.

"Oh! oh!"

"And you lie knowingly. You know that your sister is not my mistress!"

"Then, my dear, you are a down-right imbecile!"

He made such a violent gesture that she shrank back; but she was not disconcerted, however.

"Would you like to strike me?" she retorted, with a forced laugh. "But let us sit down again and resume the conversation where we left off."

Maurice was deeply annoyed, more vexed with himself, and vaguely uneasy. This dangerous woman had discovered his secret. What would she do? He would have silenced her or driven her away. But he did not dare!

"You little suspected that I was following

you a distance, in all your walks," she continued in the same tone. "That good Catherine! She would have been less at her ease had she known that I was behind her, spying, watching, searching!"

She paused for a moment, then added in a low voice, as if speaking to herself:

"I shall never forget what I suffered. The only man I ever loved, stolen from me by my sister! I saw them there, together, and I could do nothing, nothing!"

Then, with the extraordinary mobility of her nervous nature, she turned to him and exclaimed passionately:

"Then you love me no longer? Is everything forgotten, is it all over? And yet, I was not a coquette with you!"

Huberte was not threatening now; she implored:

"I beseech you, have pity on me. If you knew how unhappy I am! You told me you did not love Catherine. Prove it!"

And she came nearer to him, fawning, entreating. In vain did he try to keep her away. She grasped his hands and cried vehemently:

"I love you! What crime can you lay at my door? To have had lovers! Did I

not forgive you the mistresses you have had! And I shall be more than your mistress—I will be your slave! I cannot live without you. You belong to me! You have given me joys that I never knew of—and I love you—oh! I love you!”

After this first burst of uncontrollable passion, her voice softened, and finally seemed to die away.

A man would not be a man, if he had not moments of physical inferiority in which the senses dominate. Maurice was contemplating Huberte. How beautiful, how enticing, and how exciting, she appeared, with her appealing eyes and warm lips, offering herself to him! To him, who adored Catherine, in the flesh the living image of this one. Coveting the one who refused herself, he could deceive his desires with the other who gave herself so unreservedly. But, as in a sudden vision, he saw the woman he cherished—that noble Catherine, so high and so pure that human vileness could not reach her.

“You love me?” he replied, in steady tones. “I do not love you! What is dead is dead! It is no more in your power, than it is in mine, to recall those vanished days!”

She started as if she had received a blow.

“Why can we not remain friends?” he continued. “Is it necessary that we should hate because we no longer adore each other?”

“I! your friend? You are mad!” she said, bitterly, again becoming haughty and imperious. “What a fool I was to humiliate myself before you! I should have known better. You could not love me, since you love Catherine! That woman—oh! how I hate her! And do you think that I shall not avenge myself? Indeed, I cannot picture the whole thing without a laugh! The infallible Catherine, with a lover! It is to be hoped that she will drop her saintly airs for the future, and that she will not inflict her virtuous homelies on me! Who knows even if you are really the first? All those hypocrites are the same! One would absolve them without confession——”

“Silence!” cried Maurice, clasping his nervous fingers around her wrist.

“Maurice!——”

“Silence, I say!”

“Oh! how you must love her!”

“Yes, I love her!” he exclaimed, raising his head proudly. “I love her for her purity, for her nobility—for all that you have not! I can more easily forgive you for what you did

over there at Dijon, than for your resemblance to her! You appear like her caricature—like her image, vilified and degraded! You believe that your beauty, your charms, your wit, attracted me? No! it was *her* whom I was searching in you! Though I had but a glimpse of her, she possessed my heart entirely from the very first minute. And when you saw me so tender, so devoted, so loving, I was vainly trying to deceive myself! I was endeavoring to find her lips on your lips, her eyes in your eyes!"

She did not say a word; she did not make a gesture. She was gazing at Maurice in a tragic immobility. There was something wild in her gaze. Could he have guessed the violent thoughts that rushed through her brain, he might have been truly frightened. After a few moments, she shrugged her shoulders disdainfully, and walked out without turning her head.

She had scarcely disappeared when Maurice realized his imprudence. In a burst of passion he had revealed his love. What would this violent, passionate and jealous creature do? Huberte had threatened him with her vengeance. The vengeance of such a woman could be but frightful and terrible!

XVIII.

He had but little leisure to reflect, however. Huberte had scarcely left him when he heard a knock at the door.

"Come in," he said, annoyed at the intrusion.

It was the Swiss maid, who begged M. de Fonde to come to her mistress' apartments at once. Jacques had suddenly become worse. The improvement noticed by the physician had been of short duration. The rheumatism had increased in intensity in a few hours. The boy experienced much difficulty in breathing, and sharp pains in the region of the heart. The delirium had returned, and the child recognized no one. Until now, the treatment had not varied: salicylic acid to combat the rheumatism, sulphate of quinine to lessen the fever and strengthen the patient.

Maurice reached Catherine's room as the physician was leaving it. At the first glance the young man understood all. Mme. de Vrède stood at the bedside, pale and anxious.

"Look at him!" she said, as Maurice approached.

The poor child's head was thrown back on the pillow, his face was livid, his breathing short and painful, and he was muttering incoherent words. His haggard eyes remained motionless, as Maurice bent over him with a sinking heart. In a few words Catherine explained all. This attack had come when she felt most reassured; she had immediately sent for the doctor, and he had ordered a large blister to be placed on his breast, a little to the left.

"The doctor is uneasy," she added, briefly, "but I will save my child. Impossible that he should die, or there is no God!"

"Die? Oh! no."

And Maurice tried to calm the distressed mother. He could not, however misunderstand the alarming symptoms. The weak pulse, the difficult breathing, testified to the ravages of the disease in this frail little body. And yet, Catherine did not realize the cruel truth. She was one of those moth-

ers who, though tortured by fear, still keep a secret hope within their hearts. "O, that my child may not die!" she said, and thought within herself: "No, it is not possible!"

The fatal *denouement* was not long in coming. About six o'clock, Jacques had a syncope; then he opened his eyes for the last time, and, falling back on the pillow, he heaved a light sigh.

Over! it was all over! Catherine would not believe it. She strained the child's body in her arms, covering it with kisses and tears. She called on him wildly, as if he were still a living creature. Then the remembrance of the reality would again penetrate into this broken heart. "Oh! a mother's tears!" says the poet.

Of what use is it attempting to console the inconsolable? Maurice remained at her side, hesitating, distressed; he scorned the commonplace phrases, which irritate rather than appease sorrow. He knew the heart of this woman. Time alone could lull her intolerable pain; but it would never bring forgetfulness. He loved her so well that he felt all the pain she endured; and his presence was for Catherine a comfort, and an invaluable help.

Death is surrounded by a hundred hideous formalities, which redouble its horrors. Catherine wished to bring the child's body to Paris; it was, therefore, necessary to solicit authorizations, to take many steps, and to run from one official to the other. What would she have done alone, without a friend to assist her in her distress? She had telegraphed to M. de Vréde, but he had no desire to leave his pleasures. He sent a few words in reply, in which he spoke of "his profound grief." There are many husbands like M. de Vréde, but few such fathers. Duty commanded him to take the first train and join his wife. Had she not the greatest need of his assistance? But no; he allowed her to undertake that terrible journey alone.

Maurice understood her grief as a mother, and her humiliation as a wife. His love became still more tender, almost brotherly. He devoted himself entirely to her, sparing her all the necessary sad details.

They who transport their cherished dead from one end of France to the other, know the agony of those slow, never-to-be-forgotten hours. The railway companies do not accept coffins on their fast trains, as if such journeys were not already long enough.

Catherine did not even have the consolation of keeping before her eyes the casket containing the remains of her child. She only knew him to be there, in a baggage van, under a double envelope of lead and wood. Twice during that terrible night she seized Maurice's hands, crying, in her distress:

"If you were not with me I should go mad!"

They arrived in Paris on a rainy morning, and more formalities had to be gone through, which were again spared her by Maurice.

All these proofs of affection touched her deeply. In a suffering woman, the heart is most impressible; as her nerves are so fearfully unstrung, she feels more intensely the pains and joys.

Thus was the gratitude Catherine felt toward Maurice, mingled with a great deal of tenderness. Being now condemned to months of retirement, almost buried in solitude, Catherine had no distractions but this unique friend.

How she admired his delicacy! Each day he brought her the echoes of Paris, from which she was, at the same time, so far and so near. Not once did he allude to his love. Faithful to his promise, he worshiped her in

silence; one word about his passion would have seemed to him like a profanation of his idol. She read this love in his eyes; she saw it in his attentions. A stranger might have heard their conversation without suspecting anything. The most chaste of young girls could have witnessed the meetings of this man and woman, who loved each other so passionately, without guessing that a bond united their hearts.

Nevertheless, Catherine's affection grew stronger day by day. Little by little, Maurice was replacing in her heart the cherished child, who had flown away. Her friend's presence was not only a joy, but a need. Maurice usually came at four o'clock in the afternoon, and remained with her until dinner time. Sometimes she would say to him:

"You see, I am alone as usual. My husband will not return. Dine with me, this evening."

Maurice accepted these invitations with delight; his daily visits were his only recreation. The world was ignorant of them, as Catherine was living almost isolated. But it was impossible that M. de Vrède should also be unaware of them. What could he

think? Was he complaisant or blind? M. de Fonde allowed himself to be guided by Catherine. Did she not possess superior wisdom? If she permitted these frequent visits, it must be that no one had the right to raise a voice against them.

Weeks glided by, weeks of intense bliss; and for the first time in his life Maurice felt perfectly happy. As for Catherine, what would have become of her, if the young man had not been there to speak of Jacques? She spoke of her beloved child every day. She had preserved photographs of him at three different ages, and also his favorite toys.

"Do you recognize these?" she asked him one evening. "You sent them to him at Aix."

The mother's eyes filled with tears, and he did not chide her. He would rather have added: "Weep, it will do you good." The child who was no more, remained present between them, like a sacred link and a sweet souvenir. They both acknowledged that the purest and best of their love came from this child. Catherine had become interested in Maurice in the first days, because he was kind to Jacques; and Maurice to please Catherine had humored and petted the pretty

boy. The human heart is so small that it cannot contain many affections. It mingles them, as if to confound them, and makes but one love out of all it encloses!

Months passed away, and M. de Fonde had not yet been introduced to M. de Vréde. It even seemed as if Catherine did not wish them to meet. She seldom, or never, spoke of her husband. Maurice now always returned about ten o'clock in the evening, when he did not dine with her. He sometimes reflected on the oddity of the situation, and feared for Madame de Vréde. It was improbable that the husband should still be in ignorance of what was taking place, and if he did know, what could his thoughts be?

About the middle of November, M. de Fonde had some conversation with Robert Traville. Notwithstanding his apparent thoughtlessness, the elegant clubman was very sensible. The two friends had seen but little of each other since Maurice's return to Paris. After a few bantering words on the famous exile into the country which had so promptly terminated, Robert had dropped the subject. With his Parisian tact, he at once understood that his friend's life concealed a secret, but he did not try to provoke

a confidence which was withheld. However, one day he considered it wise to give Maurice a few words of advice.

"My dear Maurice," he said, "I ask you nothing and don't wish to know anything. Only, I hope you do not doubt the very sincere affection I have for you."

"No, indeed!"

"Then, will you accept my advice?"

"I do not understand you," replied Maurice, coldly.

"Oh! well, if you become stiff at once! However, I have sworn to talk, and I will talk. We have just reached Boulevard Haussman; come home with me, that will be better."

Robert occupied a ground-floor, full of sunshine, in the middle of the Avenue Percier, where the two friends were soon comfortably seated with their feet on the fender.

"Do you know Monsieur de Vrède?" asked Traville, phlegmatically.

Maurice jumped to his feet.

"There! don't get on your dignity!" rejoined Robert. "I am not going to drag your secrets from you. My own are troublesome enough, without encumbering myself with those of others! I simply ask you if

you know Cyrille Amédée de Vrédc, surnamed *Sac-de-Noix* (Bag of Walnuts) by the jesting world. No, you do not know him? I even wager that you never saw him? *Sac-de-Noix*, my dear fellow, is a tall, strong and very florid man. Now, each human creature has some characteristic. His is, to possess teeth, so flat and so big, that they make a peculiar noise when he talks; something like the crackling of nuts, when rubbed against each other! Do you understand the nickname? He is a treacherous man. I have known three women whom he had known intimately. And the three have given me the same advice: "Beware of him!"

Maurice had now recovered his self-possession. He had full confidence in Robert's friendship; but his secret was also Catherine's secret.

"Thanks, my friend," he replied, smiling. "Believe me, I am very grateful to you for your kind advice."

"Please notice that I make no question," rejoined Robert. "But I resume the subject. As I just said, you must beware of *Sac-de-Noix*! He is married, and has an exquisite wife, it seems. I need not say that he deceives her. Note this: libertine hus-

bands are always jealous husbands. If I were in love with Madamede Vréde, I should keep an eye— By the way, you havenot yet complimented me on this *Detaille* I bought the other day.”

Maurice understood. Traville's words were very clear. Evidently, people were beginning to talk. The young man knew by experience that nowhere is there more talk, more gossip, than inside clubs. There are so many idlers there, and among them so many idiots! He did not thank his friend a second time; that would have been a half avowal. But when they separated he pressed Traville's hand warmly. Robert smiled; too clever to not understand, and too generous to show that he did understand.



XIX.

The winter was severe; and at the beginning of January, Maurice caught a cold that confined him to his room. At first, he refused to obey the physician's orders. What! to remain at home! Why, it was to deprive himself of his greatest joy! Not to see Catherine! To miss those daily visits, which had become the only object of his existence! Madame de Vréde was forced to interpose.

"You committed a great imprudence the other day," she wrote to him. "To go out in the state you are in, is to risk your life. I forbid you to come to me. I will go to you."

Ah! the fine resolutions of older days! No doubt the death of poor little Jacques had changed everything; Catherine being entirely devoted to her mourning was no longer a

woman of the world. Would they ever exchange one word of love in their long conversations? A man's love is never absolutely chaste. In spite of himself, he thinks that the hour will come when the adored woman will no longer be capable of resisting the passion she inspires. Maurice waited, knowing well that Catherine would not refuse forever to listen to his words of love. She despised falsehood. She kept true to her marital vows in spite of all. But she loved. And when we love how weak we are!

And now she was coming to his home! There exist strange subtilities in the hearts of the most loyal of men. Who does not compromise with one's conscience? Mme. de Vrède would not listen to his love in her own home, because it was in her husband's house. But in his own home? The young woman was for the first time venturing on a visit he would not have dared solicit. In his great delight, he forgot Robert Traville's prudent advice. Besides, how could he fear a man he did not know? Since his return, he had lived absolutely and solely for his love. Had he not thus neglected his former friends and his club, he might have gathered some very precious information.

Cyrille-Amédée de Vréde, as Traville jestingly called him, would have made an excellent *cuirassier*. He loved big horses, big dinners and big women; but, being of small intelligence, he boasted of having read nothing. In literature, he preferred farce; in music, operettas; in painting, spicy subjects. Physically, he was tall and strong, with square shoulders and a broad chest. His sparse gray hair barely covered an almost solid cranium, a sure indication of stubbornness. He wore a thick, bristling moustache, which almost concealed his lips. His clean shaven cheeks and chin were of that purple hue which denotes an apoplectic nature. His character could be guessed from his eyes only. They were gray, of a misty shade, in which could be read shrewdness and stupidity. He was neither good nor wicked; merely devoid of moral sense, and about as able of deciphering hieroglyphics as of understanding a wife like his. Being quite open-handed, he spent his louis freely on the women that pleased him. They all seemed good enough for him, provided they were easy-going and not given to phrases. The main feature of his character, however, was his terror of public opinion. This brave man would not

have quailed in a duel, but he trembled in reading the venomous paragraphs of fashionable papers. In short, he was one of those beings who never listen to their conscience—if they have one—but allow themselves to be guided by the fear of ridicule.

Had Maurice known this personage, he would have taken many precautions which he scorned. But even if he had thought of taking them, the idea of Catherine—of Catherine in his own home—absolutely intoxicated him. As the young man was condemned by the physicians to keep strictly to his rooms, he sent his valet, early in the morning, to pillage a florist's shop. How could he render his modest apartment worthy of his idol?

Since his return to Paris, Maurice inhabited rooms in the Rue de la Baume, an aristocratic street, where pedestrians are few. He began to expect her, impatiently, at noon. When would she come? And when she appeared, exquisitely beautiful in her black dress, he fell on his knees before her.

"How good you are!" he cried, kissing her hands.

"To begin with, you must behave yourself," she replied, smiling. "I am here as a sister of charity."

A woman of the world, who ventures to visit a young man alone, knows perfectly well to what she exposes herself. But the proud soul of Catherine cared not for what people might say; her conscience was her only judge. It mattered not to her if the whole universe saw her enter Maurice's home; but, on the other hand, she would have died rather than be guilty of a weakness.

"You see I have full confidence in your loyalty," she continued. "But in whom would I believe, if not in you? How few men would have conducted themselves as nobly as you have done."

"Women do not usually care for that kind of nobleness," he replied.

"Do I resemble others?" she replied. "But no more of this. You are suffering; we must nurse you."

It was a delicious afternoon. Ah! how Maurice wished he could often be ill! In a few days, however, he recovered, and they again resumed their former habits. But nothing encourages one to imprudent actions like impunity. Catherine felt the danger of these daily visits in her own home; and she wished to render these visits less frequent,

without, however, depriving herself of Maurice's companionship.

"Since I visited you in your rooms when you were ill," she said to him one day, "there is nothing to prevent me from doing so again."

"What imprudence!" he cried.

"You exaggerate. Imprudence? On account of what?"

"On account of what the world may say."

"The world cares little for me. I am a poor woman in mourning, who sees no one, and of whom no one speaks."

"But your—your husband?"

"Permit me to say that no one, not even you, must speak of the relations that exist between Monsieur de Vréde and myself." Then she added, with a bewitching smile: "Does it make you so very unhappy to receive me?"

He clasped his hands in mock repentance.

"Do not ask me for forgiveness," she resumed. "I appreciate your anxieties. But henceforth I shall visit you three times a week in the Rue de la Baume. On the other days I shall expect you here, as usual."

Catherine would have been much astonished had she been told that Maurice was

not happy. But the more he saw of this exquisite creature, the more he regretted that she could not belong to him. Ah! the fine promises we make in the hours of bliss! We swear to the one we love to respect her, and—we do respect her. No word, no action, betrays the thought of the lover who has so heroically condemned himself to silence. But what of the real thoughts, the thoughts independent of the will? For Maurice this torture was doubled by the remembrance of Huberte. He knew this haughty and chaste Catherine, this woman who refused his kisses, without knowing her. He had merely to close his eyes to see her.

Often, when she had left him in his own rooms, he revolved these thoughts in his mind. And sometimes he thought of the deserted Huberte. What had become of her? With a little shiver, he recalled the young woman's menace. He knew her capable of carrying out her threats. He often even wondered at her apparent indifference. Constant, who was waiting patiently at Charmoises, had written that Madame Andrézy had come to Les Audliettes, then gone away, and again returned. Notwithstanding this statement, Maurice's fears calmed down little by little.

First, because it is human nature to forget anxieties; then, because nothing appeared changed in Mme. de Vréde's domestic life. Her husband still continued to be but a husband *in partibus*. Unfaithful, naturally! Never at home! Even Robert Traville was silent on this delicate subject. Who could, then, have advised Maurice to be prudent? And, beside, what had he to fear? Catherine loved him; and he loved this noble woman with all the ardor of his being.

Old hunters have a very wise and philosophical proverb: "In a boar hunt, the animal always comes from the direction whence he is least expected." But Maurice was too much a man of the world to bring down his adversary to the level of wild game.



XX.

It was a bitter cold day, and the pedestrians hurried along, in mortal fear of freezing. The Rue de la Baume was even more deserted than usual, and Maurice impatiently awaited the well-known noise of the fiacre that brought Catherine to the daily rendezvous. She appeared at the usual hour, but seemed strangely agitated.

"It is curious," she said, "but I feel terribly nervous since morning, and that is so unusual for me."

Since his return to Paris, Maurice had taken a new valet. Not knowing the man well enough to trust him, he always dismissed him half an hour before Mme. de Vrède's arrival. Catherine had scarcely entered when the door bell rang.

"I pity the unfortunate person standing at

your door in this weather," she said, laughing.

The bell rang again.

"So much the worse for indiscreet people," replied Maurice.

A third and a fourth ring came in quick succession; not a timid ring, like that of a visitor who fears to be importunate; on the contrary, the bell vibrated almost furiously.

"In your place, I would go and see who it is," observed Mme. de Vréde

"Do you think I had better go?"

"If it is a tradesman or a friend- you can say you are not alone."

Whoever he might be, the indiscreet person did not get discouraged, but continued to ring with stubborn vigor.

"You are right," said Maurice, "I will go and see who it is."

He passed out into the hall and opened the door.

"Sapristi! you were a long time coming! I am nearly frozen!" exclaimed the laughing voice of a woman.

"Clotilde!"

"My very self."

And as the young man remained motionless, stupefied, unable to believe his senses, Clotilde carefully closed the door.

"You are astonished, eh? But come, we have no time to lose. You will understand by-and-bye. Madame de Vréde is in your parlor?"

"Nonsense!" he replied.

"It is you who are talking nonsense, my good fellow!" retorted Mlle. Françoise Clampin, whom her old lover believed had long ago become Mme. Brack.

And, sure of herself, she walked straight into the room where Catherine was. The latter had risen, somewhat frightened by the sound of the voices, and vaguely anxious, as if she had a presentiment of an unknown danger.

When she found herself in the presence of Mme. de Vréde, Clotilde completely changed her manner, and became as respectful as if she were standing before a queen.

"Pardon me, Madame," she said. "I am not worthy to speak to a woman like you. But I came to save you."

"To save me!"

"In a quarter of an hour, perhaps less, Monsieur de Vréde will be here. Read this."

And before Maurice and Catherine had recovered from their astonishment, the pretty Veronèse handed to her ex-lover a sheet

of note paper. The letter was short, but very clear.

"Do you want to know where your wife goes regularly three times a week? No. 22 Rue de la Baume, at M. de Fonde's apartments. To-morrow, Wednesday, at three o'clock."

Whence came this precise denunciation? It certainly came from a well-informed enemy. Maurice's first thought was to ask Clotilde where she had obtained this dangerous paper; but before he had time to say a word, Clotilde turned to Mme. de Vréde, saying:

"I hope you will excuse me now, Madame. Allow me to be your guide to the end of this incident."

"I will be guided by you, Madame, and I feel deeply grateful," replied Catherine. "Command, and I shall obey."

Clotilde looked curiously around the room.

"Is that your bed-room over there?" she asked Maurice.

"Yes," he replied.

"And next to the bed-room?"

"The dressing-room."

"Very well. Come, Madame."

And motioning Catherine to follow, she went straight to the dressing-room, which

was separated from the bed-room by a closet.

"Go in there, Madame," she said. "Lock the door from the inside, and do not open unless M. de Fonde or myself call."

All this had not lasted more than five minutes. Catherine had immediately realized the danger. When Clotilde and Maurice were once more alone in the parlor, the young woman burst into a laugh.

"And to think that you don't understand yet!" she exclaimed.

"Upon my word, I do not."

"She is quicker than you; but it is true she is a woman. Learn, my little darling"—she retained the pet name—"that M. de Vrède has been my lover these last six months."

"What! six months?"

"Yes."

"And your husband?"

"What husband?" she asked, naïvely. Then a thought traversed her light brain, and she again burst into a merry laugh.

"Ah! Doctor Brack?" she rejoined. "I had forgotten. Then, don't you know about it? Oh! we published the bans, but twelve hours before going to the mayor's office, I fell in love with a clown. So I dropped everything

there and then. The clown left me for a circus rider, and I took M. de Vréde in his place."

These little confidences were interrupted by the sound of voices; a growing tumult ascending the stairway.

"There is the husband, and he is accompanied by a commissaire de police," said Clotilde. "What a fuss! Now, my little darling, keep cool, and I will answer for everything."

"But I don't understand your plan," said Maurice.

"So much the better! You will have the surprise of the denouement. There—listen—they are knocking at the outside door—"

"Open!—in the name of the law!" called a gruff voice from without.

"How stupid those husbands are!" laughed Clotilde. "Let them pose a few minutes at the door. I will shut myself up in your bedroom—not because I am afraid, however. Ta-ta, my little darling!"

And she disappeared with a gay laugh. Maurice began to understand her ingenious plan. Really, she was a charming girl, to thus come to the rescue of the persecuted! However, he must decide on what he should do, for the gruff voice was calling on him for the third time "to open the door, in the

name of the law!" Maurice assumed a careless air and obeyed.

M. de Vrède precipitated himself into the apartment, followed by the magistrate, who wore a tri-color scarf around his waist. The outraged husband was livid with fury.

"My wife—my wife is here!" he cried.

"Is she indeed? Monsieur, you are either drunk or mad," declared Maurice, insolently.

The police officer, who belonged to a race of peaceable and prudent people, thought it time to interpose.

"I beg of you, Messieurs, I beg. Do not forget that you are gentlemen!

"Pray explain the cause of this intrusion, *Monsieur le Commissaire*," said Maurice, turning to him, inquiringly.

"Monsieur has requested my services, that I may legally testify to the presence of his wife in your apartment," replied the officer.

"How absurd!" declared Maurice, haughtily.

At this instant, the bed-room door opened, and Clotilde Veronèse appeared, in a coquetish dishabille. In a simple skirt, without bodice, her red hair loose on her half-bare shoulders, the young woman was ravishingly pretty.

“Ah! what is all this talk?” she asked, with an air of astonishment. Then, turning to M. de Vréde she exclaimed:

“What! you, Amédée! What are you doing in Maurice’s house, my little darling?”

The *commissaire* was evidently puzzled. He, however, bowed politely to the new comer.

“You are, then, Madame de Vréde?” he asked.

Clotilde burst into a loud laugh.

“I Madame de Vréde? I shall die laughing! I am Francoise Clampin, alias Clotilde Véronèse—monsieur’s mistress!”

This burlesque scene could only terminate by the retreat of the magistrate, much disgusted at the ridiculous role he had unwittingly played. Ordered to follow the jealous husband, who requested his services, as law provides, he had never expected to find Clotilde Véronèse mixed up in the affair. As for M. de Vréde, his fury was more comical than terrifying.

“Clotilde!—Clotilde!—you here!” he stammered, choking with rage.

The magistrate murmured a few words of apology and retired, courteously escorted to the door by Maurice, who was very happy to

see him depart, while Clotilde smiled gaily to her Amédée, and added, sarcastically:

“You thought your wife was here, did you, my little darling? And instead of the leading actress you find the substitute! Don't you know that Maurice is a—an old flame of mine?”





XXI.

A man is strong when he does not feel that he is ridiculous. *Sac-de-Noix* possessed that strength. Any one else would have found himself grotesque between that pretty girl and this Parisian, who, notwithstanding his courtesy, was evidently making fun of him. Amédée, however, affected a conquering mien, twisting his heavy moustache in a defiant manner. But now it was time to end the scene.

"Let them settle it between themselves," thought Clotilde, as she made a mocking bow, and retired into the bed-room.

M. de Vréde's silence immediately became loquacity.

"And you believe that matters will stop there, Monsieur?" he thundered.

"I believe nothing at all," replied Maurice,

quietly. "But as you are in my house, allow me to do the honors," and he pointed to a chair.

"You were saying, Monsieur?" he asked, with assumed seriousness, when they were seated.

Sac-de-Noix whistled softly, to conceal his discomfiture in finding himself in this equivocal situation.

"I was saying—Ah! the deuce! I was saying that—that you must give me satisfaction," he stammered.

"Have I, then, insulted you?" said Maurice.

"Monsieur!"

"Monsieur?"

The two adversaries still maintained their respective positions; M. de Vrède exasperated and violent; Maurice ironical and cool.

"Then you pretend that I have insulted you? I do not see it very clearly. Try to be logical. You invade my private domicile; you enter it by force, accompanied by a representative of the law; you pretend that your wife and myself are engaged—in criminal conversation, to employ the elegant euphemism of lawyers! And when you become convinced that Madame de Vrède has been calumniated—"

"It is not a question of Madame de Vréde," growled Amédée, "but of—"

"Of Mlle. Clotilde Véronèse? In that case I understand you still less. You are only my successor. I knew her before you met her."

"Then you refuse to fight, Monsieur?" roared Amédée, in a paroxysm of rage.

"I? Not at all! I am merely trying to find out why we are going to fight."

"Because I have found my—my mistress with you! My seconds will wait on you this evening."

"Your seconds? Very well. I shall expect them."

Clotilde, who was now dressed, entered at this moment, and heard these last words.

"Indeed, you will do nothing of the kind," she declared, coming quickly toward Maurice. "You hear, my little darling. I forbid you to fight with that big fellow!"

And turning to M. de Vréde, who was stamping his feet in a fury, she added:

"As for you, my dear, the matter stands thus. It is a matter of indifference to me whether Maurice and you have a duel or not. He is the best fencer. Only, if there is a meeting, I drop you."

"Clotilde!"

"A *debutante* would say 'kss! kss!' to you both, because a duel gives lots of free advertising. But my position is too well assured now. It would only compromise me."

"Ha! ha! Compromise!" laughed Maurice.

"Certainly, my little darling. You may laugh, but it is true. At my age, I must pass for a serious woman—as I am. No scandal around my name; you hear, Amédée. So you may choose. If you send your seconds to M. de Fonde, it will settle you, as far as I am concerned!"

And as Amédée still appeared undecided, she added, tauntingly:

"Beside, why this duel? Because I have deceived you? I assure you, it is not the first time!"

Then, shrugging her shoulders, she extended her hand to Maurice, saying:

"Good bye, my little darling; I must run away. Come and see me."

"Certainly."

"As to you, Amédée—"

"I will accompany you!"

"Oh, no! I am going alone. Don't forget my ultimatum."

And with a coquettish and graceful nod, she disappeared, escorted by Maurice. Once

alone in the hall, he seized his pretty friend by the waist, and kissed her affectionately.

"You are exquisite, little one," he said.

"Oh! no. I am only fair and just. I am always amiable with those who are amiable to me, but I am a terror to others." Then, bursting into a merry laugh, she added: "I would give a great deal to see you two tête-a-tête when you go back in the parlor."

In fact, the situation was rather ludicrous. M. de Vréde's face expressed the most contradictory thoughts. What would he decide? And how could he make his love agree with his vanity? Maurice almost pitied him for his ridiculous plight.

"May I ask what you have decided upon doing, Monsieur?" asked Maurice, as he resumed his seat.

"She is mad," exclaimed M. de Vréde, throwing up his arms helplessly. "What do you think of it?"

As M. de Fonde could not repress a smile, he rejoined:

"Perhaps you can explain her character, since, as you admit, you knew her long before I did. In fact, Monsieur, I have no alternative; I must obey her. I withdraw, regretting very much the fuss I have made. Pray excuse me."

"You need not apologize, Monsieur," said Catherine, gravely, as she suddenly appeared between the silk portières.

This unexpected apparition completely bewildered M. de Vréde. His wife after his mistress! Both together! And together in M. de Fonde's apartments! This accursed rival had, then, stolen them both!

"Your informant did not deceive you," she resumed. "You might, however, have remained in ignorance of my presence in this house, if I had willed it; I had but to wait until you had gone. But I have always detested falsehood, and I would not, even now, profit by it. Moreover, why should I hide? I am here because I love you passionately, Maurice, I say it before you, and before the man whose name I bear, because I am ready to exchange that name for yours."

Amédée's brain was ready to burst. All these events succeeding each other in such unexpected fashion seemed like magic. The unfortunate man could not understand it. He had expected to find Catherine with Maurice, and he had found him with Clotilde! And the latter had laughed at him, unscrupulously, and, after jeering at him so outrageously, had gone, darting a last imperti-

nent remark. And now it was Catherine! Deceived as a lover, reviled as a husband; it was, indeed, too much. He sank into a chair, looking alternately at his wife and at Maurice, with his bulging eyes, no longer defiant, but frightened and tamed.

"You do well to sit down," she said, with a shade of sarcasm in her tone. "We have much to say. You are at a loss to understand why you did not find me here in a criminal position. The young woman who has just left possesses a heart nobler than yours. How the anonymous letter fell into her hands, I cannot say; but she would not permit me to become the victim of your cowardice, as well as the victim of your debauchery."

M. de Vréde writhed under these words. He made an impatient gesture and said, in a hoarse voice:

"How can you dare speak thus, in your lover's house."

"M. de Fonde is not my lover," she interrupted. "And you know me too well not to be convinced of that. When you came here accompanied by an officer of the law, it was not to avenge your honor, but solely to find a weapon against me. You know that

the world pities me as much as it scorns you. You know that your debaucheries disgust even your associates in vice. You wanted to excuse the past, and to prepare for the future. And by what means? By throwing mire on your wife's name!"

She spoke with such dignity, with such haughty pride, that Maurice gazed at her in admiration.

"Madame!"—— began de Vrède.

"Pray do not interrupt me," said Catherine, quickly. "I have not done. You may answer in a moment, if you think fit. What is the result of your worthy calculations? The magistrate who escorted you can legally testify—legally, you understand, Monsieur?—to my innocence and your misconduct. It was not the legitimate wife he found; it was the mistress. Did you not admit the links that unite you to Mlle. Clotilde Véronèse? I require no more to ask and obtain a divorce."

"Divorce!" he hissed, in a frenzy, his purple cheeks turning ashen, "No, indeed. I can easily prove that you were here——"

"Proofs? Who will furnish them? No one. Not even the excellent girl who does you the honor of receiving you in her home.

She has saved me, and would not ruin me now. I have found out that her heart is in the right place, and I feel sure of her sincerity. So, you see, you are the only guilty one. I shall become free, and it is only just, since I have always been a faithful wife, that I should be rid of you, who have always been an unfaithful husband!"

"So be it; we shall appeal to the law," said M. de Vréde rising, abruptly. "My servants can testify to the assiduity of M. de Fonde's visits to you!"

"As you wish. However, I believe that the servants will testify in my favor. And what matters it, after all? To your witnesses, whoever they be, I will oppose but one testimony: that of my entire life!"

"You forget that I am rich and--and you are not," he retorted, with a sardonic laugh.

"M. de Fonde will not marry me for my fortune. Had my darling child lived, I would still continue to endure my martyrdom without a complaint. I sacrificed myself for him only. I now belong to myself, since, alas! Providence has broken the sacred link that bound me to you. I will not return to your house. My maid will bring me all that is necessary in the retreat I have chosen,

the house of the Ladies of Nazareth. Farewell, Monsieur; I have nothing more to say. Your arm, Maurice!"

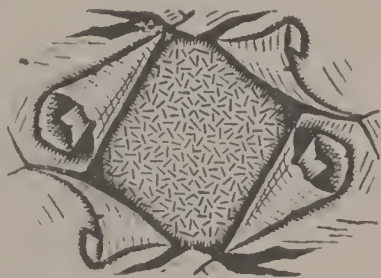
Catherine had refuted, one by one, all her husband's arguments. Shrewdness and vice had failed against frankness and uprightness. Catherine's loyalty assured her success. Before leaving her husband forever, she gazed at him for a last time. He stood abashed before her, muttering confused phrases. He could do nothing, nothing to avenge himself! He fully recognized the truth of her words. Everybody would be against him. Yes, everybody! For he knew the universal antipathy he inspired. An antipathy he attributed to the jealousy of his neighbors, to the covetousness of his friends, who envied his wealth, his good health and his pretty mistresses. Poor unfortunate *Sac-de-Noix*! He had not even the satisfaction of fighting against his detested rival. He now wanted Clotilde Veronèse more than ever. To be abandoned by his wife and his mistress at the same time, would have produced a ripple of laughter from the Rue Boissy-d'Anglas to the Rue Royale! While all these confused thoughts were rushing through his brain, Catherine and Maurice

had quietly departed, leaving this husband—caught in his own trap like the fox of the fable—to his melancholy reflections.

“Bah!” said M. de Vréde, “I must take it philosophically. Everything has its good side. Catherine will obtain her divorce. So much the better—a clear economy! For what earthly good was she to me anyway! Not counting that with the money she cost me, I can double Clotilde’s allowance!”

He complacently examined himself in the mirror, well satisfied with his vulgar reasonings.

“Let her get her divorce!” he repeated. “What do I care!”



XXII.

Huberte left Aix-en-Savoie the day following her interview with Maurice. Another would have been weary of those incessant journeys. But the jealousy which burned in Madame Andrèzy's heart goaded her to action, and she felt no fatigue. She knew she was uttering a deliberate falsehood in accusing Maurice of being Catherine's lover. Huberte knew her sister well enough not to doubt, for a moment, her irreproachable virtue. How Maurice must love this creature to accept the tortures of Platonic love! But would she not avenge herself? They would see! She trembled with rage at the mere thought that her schemes of vengeance might fail.

This hatred against her sister dated from many years back! From childhood, the

character of each had been clearly defined. Catherine was industrious, patient, docile and gentle; Huberte, indolent, nervous, and rebellious. The former, grave, reserved, pious; the latter, sarcastic, forward and wicked. The first breach was caused by the parents' comparisons. They continually repeated to Huberte: "Catherine would not have done that," or, "Try to imitate Catherine." Catherine always, always and always! And as Huberte possessed certain qualities, being above all frank to a degree, she had never attempted to disguise her aversion.

When the two girls had emerged from childhood, this rivalry still continued. Catherine won all hearts; Huberte was loved by none. She was feared, while her sister was worshiped. Even marriageable young men judged the twin sisters correctly. They were beautiful enough to marry without a dowry; but they were not totally devoid of money, having an income of 4,000 francs each. Many considered that Huberte, with her bold gaze and giddy manners, would make a dangerous wife; while Catherine, with her look of quiet firmness, her perfect manners, and her proud chastity, tranquilized the

most timorous. As often happens, the two sisters won very rich husbands by their opposite characteristics. M. de Vréde, a dissipated man, fell in love with the one who least resembled the women he associated with, and avoided the one who resembled them so much; while M. Garlin-Rueil, pious but sensual, was attracted by the enticing creature, whose challenging gaze and bold ways distinguished her from the modest, demure girls he usually met.

Even in marriage the provoking comparison continued still. At the end of a few years of an ill-assorted union, M. Garlin-Rueil, though still in love with his wife, had learned to know her thoroughly. Why had he married this coquette, with depraved instincts, whose extravagant toilets created a sensation all over Bordeaux, from the Grand-Theatre to the Public-Garden? No one, however, could breathe a word against Huverte's good name, for nothing was known of her secret life. The scandal did not burst on society until later. But M. Garlin-Rueil never missed the opportunity of remarking:

“How can two sisters so perfectly alike physically, be so entirely dissimilar morally?”

"Of what are you complaining, my dear?" his wife would answer impertinently. "You are the one who proposed to me. Why did you not marry Catherine?"

After the husband's remonstrances, came those of all the pious cousins, nieces and aunts who composed the family: "Mme. de Vréde was pious; Mme. de Vréde was charitable; Mme. de Vréde's conduct was irreproachable." These little wounds to Huberte's vanity gave birth to deep hatred. Later, she endured the supreme humiliation of being defended, in her time of trouble, by the sister she so thoroughly detested. After Huberte's separation from M. Garlin-Rueil, Mme. de Vréde had come to her rescue. Catherine possessed some influence with her brother-in-law, and owing to her intercession, Huberte was allowed to lead an honorable, if not a very gay existence, at Arnay-le-Comte.

And now Mme. Andrézy was again thrown in contact with this execrated sister! The pious Catherine had robbed her of the only man she had ever loved! While the train carried her toward Dijon, she dreamed of plans of revenge worthy of a Mohican. When she again found herself alone at Les Audliettes, her indefatigable brain began

to plan and plan. First, she must have an ally in the place. Mme. Andrézy could count on Julia; and through her she would receive the confidences made by Constant. It was necessary that she should know what Maurice's intentions were. It was thus she learned he had rented apartments in Paris, and postponed his return to Arnay-le-Comte. On receiving this information she became furious; she could hope no longer. Her former lover had determined to rejoin Catherine and live near her, at any price. Huberte never hesitated, and her resolution was soon taken. After a long conversation with Julia, now promoted to the position of confidante, she left Les Audliettes for Paris.

Four or five times a year, people whose names figure in the annuals of the clubs receive circulars, prepared in a deceitful, crafty and flattering style. They are printed sheets, in which Monsieur——addresses himself “to the army, the bar, and the higher classes, etc.” The reader, without much perspicacity, can easily understand what their purpose is. They are issued by a firm who makes a specialty of supplying one with private spies. Why should not Mme. Andrézy have recourse to one of these Argus-eyed persons, who are as vigilant

as they are disinterested? She wanted to know the comings and goings of M. de Fonde; and at the same time she would be watching Catherine's existence. Huberte might, no doubt, have feared the treachery of these so-called trustworthy firms, who often practice a safe and remunerative form of blackmail. But by paying well, she hoped to be faithfully informed. Events served her to perfection. After a few days of observation, she was notified that Mme. de Vréde visited M. de Fonde three times a week, in his apartments of the Rue de la Baume.

So Maurice was escaping her, and forever. What was to be done? A Parisian philosopher has remarked that, seven times out of ten, the jealous woman who wants to revenge herself has recourse to the same base means—the anonymous letter. Each reasons in the same identical way: since it has always succeeded, why not adopt it? Huberte reflected a whole morning before throwing in the mail-box the four lines which she knew would bring the inevitable result. The information given was most precise: "*Do you wish to know where your wife,*" etc. Mme. Andrézy's vivid imagination conjured up the events as they should take place. She knew

that M. de Vréde believed in Catherine's virtue; but no husband could resist the temptation she laid before him, especially such a husband as he was. The greatest punishment of libertines is that they distrust all women, even the purest. Huberte was therefore convinced that the mine dug under the feet of her enemies would explode at the appointed hour.

Notwithstanding the excessive cold of that Wednesday, she entered a cab and prepared herself to watch. Before her the Rue de la Baume stretched, deserted and icy, and only a few steps from her observatory was the house, No. 22, where M. de Vréde was to surprise the lovers. First, Huberte saw a stylish coupé stop at the door, and a pretty creature, in a showy toilet, alight from it. She never imagined that Clotilde's presence would change the somber drama into a burlesque. Then, ten minutes later, she heaved a sigh of joy, as she caught sight of her brother-in-law, very red, very excited, gesticulating in the middle of the walk. At his side was a stranger, a police officer, no doubt, who was vainly trying to calm him. The die was cast! Neither Catherine nor Maurice could now escape. Ah! how much

she would have wished to be present at the scene! For she did not apprehend for a moment the failure of her scheme.

Some time elapsed without Huberte's patience giving out. She felt neither cold nor fatigue; she would willingly have paid even more dearly for the joy of tasting her vengeance. Suddenly she thought she must be dreaming; the man she had taken for a police officer reappeared, looking confused and abashed. Then, half an hour later, Catherine emerged from the house, leaning on M. de Fonde's arm. Could things have turned out badly? Two hypotheses were possible: she had either calumniated her sister, or M. de Vréde had been satisfied with an explanation. But Huberte could not understand why her brother-in-law remained so long in his rival's apartments. When she saw him come out in his turn, his face apoplectic, his eyes flaming with rage, she almost guessed the truth. Her enemies had escaped the trap she had set for them; but how? She was dying with the desire to know; her curiosity goaded her to frenzy.

"Whom can I question?" thought she. "My sister or Maurice? Impossible; they would not answer me. Beside, it would be denouncing myself."

Huberte ordered the coachman to drive back to the hotel where she stopped on her unfrequent visits to Paris. She had still half the afternoon before her to reflect and come to some resolution. Seated before a warm fire, she allowed her imagination to wander in the land of dreams. The idea came to her to call on the *commissaire* of that precinct, hoping that by simulating anxiety concerning her sister, she might become the recipient of the magistrate's confidence.

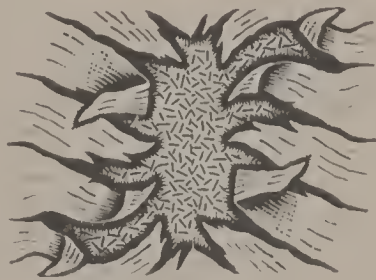
"No, I would only expose myself to the danger I wish to avoid," she said, aloud. "Sooner or later Catherine would hear of this step, and ask herself, not without reason, how I knew."

After all, why not go to M. de Vrède? Her sister and brother-in-law supposed her in ignorance of everything. She should say she was merely going through Paris, and what was more natural than that she should visit them? Mme. Andrézy and M. de Vrède had always been excellent friends. This Parisian rake, who was furious at the mere thought of a treason that would wound his vanity, always showed great indulgence for his sister-in-law's extravagant follies.

"Garlin-Rueil is an imbecile," he often said.

“Why should he make such a fuss over a mere garrison adventure?”

In fact, this libertine, though he would not have had her as a wife, found Huberte charming as a comrade. This graceful creature, with her bold manners and sensual gaze, pleased him by her outspoken perversity. It was only natural that the husband should not share this opinion! Nothing, therefore, prevented Huberte from presenting herself at her brother-in-law's house, and the more she reflected the better she saw the advantage of her combination. To know all without exciting any suspicion; this was the object.



XXIII.

After the violent and ridiculous scene in which he had played so contemptible a part, M. de Vréde hastened to his club. Like all persons who mistrust their neighbors, he was in perpetual fear of the opinion of others, and was anxious to find out if any one had yet heard about the affair. He was soon reassured on this point, however; no one looked at him with a curious smile, and the familiar faces retained their habitual expression of indifference. Besides, who could have committed the indiscretion? The magistrate was held by professional secrecy; as to Maurice and Catherine, it was to their interest to be silent; Clotilde alone could be feared. Not that she was malicious, but she was so giddy. Amédée sincerely hoped she had returned straight home from the Rue de

la Baume, and as he was to dine with her he would advise her to be silent.

Somewhat calmed, he now turned his steps homeward, curious to know if Catherine had given any signs of life. On his arrival, a servant informed him that madame had sent a messenger for her maid.

"Good, good. No one has been here then?" muttered M. de Vrède.

"I beg monsieur's pardon, Mme. Garlin-Rueil is in the drawing room waiting for monsieur."

"Just the woman I want to see!" he thought, pleased to have a chat with his sister-in-law, under such circumstances.

Huberte possessed that sovereign art—which all women practise so cleverly—of concealing curiosity under a mask of indifference.

"Good day, my dear brother," she said, as he entered. "Am I not a good girl? My first visit is for you? How is Catherine? They tell me she is out."

"Out! out!" he repeated in a fury.

Huberte began to laugh.

"Ah! what are you laughing at?" he asked, as he walked up and down the room excitedly, growling like a caged bear.

Finally, he stopped in front of his sister-in-law, his hands thrust in his pockets, his hair disordered, his whole face reflecting his vulgar instincts.

"Your sister Catherine is always out," he said, with a cynical laugh. "Oh! yes, you are surprised! You allowed yourself to be deceived like everybody else by her pious looks and honeyed words. A hypocrite! Like all of her kind, she played the chaste Suzanne at home, and went to the neighbors for dissipation!"

"Are you crazy?" asked Huberte, feigning indignation.

"No! I am not crazy?" cried Amédeé, his face turning purple with rage. "Indeed I am not. Do you know where I come from? I come from her lover's house! But I will tell you the whole story. Upon my word, it is a curious one! Imagine that the other day I received an anonymous letter. You shake your head? Oh! I know everybody affects the utmost contempt for anonymous letters, yet they are all afraid of them. Four lines only it was, but of such precision! I learned beyond a doubt, that—that I was no better treated than your husband!"

In any other circumstance, Huberte would

have resented the ill-bred allusion, but she now let it pass unnoticed. A curious woman does not resent insolence.

"It seems that this M. de Fonde was formerly on good terms with—with Clotilde Véronèse," he resumed. "You know Clotilde? No! Well, she is my mistress. Splendid woman, I assure you, and a very expensive one, too! In short, Clotilde found the anonymous letter, and decided to save the guilty ones. A comedy, my dear! Not even a comedy, a burlesque! I reached the Rue de la Baume, expecting to surprise your sister and—and the other. Naturally I was flanked by a police officer. We ascended the stairs, and came on them unawares. My wife? No. My mistress! My mistress, who ridiculed me in the bargain, and turned the tables on me so cleverly that the officer left quite discomfited, after apologizing to M. de Fonde. More than that: it is not Catherine who is guilty, but I. Upon my word! She will apply for a divorce, pleading my notorious misconduct!"

"Divorce!" This one word fell on Huberte's ears like a knell.

"And the worst of it is, that I cannot defend myself," continued Amédéc. "Has not

madame a witness ready to testify in her favor, in that blockhead of a police officer? Oh! I know well enough what she is aiming at. She will marry her M. de Fonde."

Madame Andrézy shuddered, but she had too much control over herself to betray her feelings.

"All that you tell me seems very extraordinary," she said at last. "Catherine to ask for a divorce!"

"How she must love Maurice!" she thought. "A pious woman like her must be ruled by an invincible passion, to resign herself to this extremity."

"And how did this memorable interview terminate?" she resumed aloud, with a forced laugh.

"Parbleu!" exclaimed her brother-in-law, shrugging his shoulders. "Those denouements nevery vary. Catherine will not return here. She has sent for her maid, and will take refuge in a convent; in an austere house naturally! With the Ladies of Nazareth."

Amédée and Huberte then exchanged a few common-place phrases, but the former did not feel in the humor for conversation, and the latter was now in possession of all

she wanted to know. She longed for solitude, that she might reflect on what was to be done. For the first time in her life, this fearless creature felt the ground sink under her feet. No resource was left her in her bitter disgrace. Amédée could do nothing to help her, since he possessed no power over his wife. When the wife takes judiciary action, the husband's rights are not destroyed, but they are suspended. Until the tribunal pronounces judgment, she who is but a minor legally, enjoys almost full liberty. Huberte realized all this, and her ever-excited brain vainly sought a solution. How would she emerge from the maze into which she had strayed?

While reflecting, Mme. Andrézy had re-entered her hotel, where she again seated herself before the blazing fire, and conceived the most violent projects. Maurice would pay dearly for casting her aside! The only man she had ever loved to thus repulse her, and to give himself body and soul—to whom? To Catherine—to her rival the enemy of her whole life! Not to avenge herself? Neither of them could believe her so weak! Indeed she would avenge herself! Yes, but how? Where would she find the poisoned

arrow she needed? Calumny could not stain a woman as pure as Catherine. Seduction was powerless with a man like Maurice, who loved and trusted at the same time. Impossible also to create a doubt in her sister's heart. Then? Then they would marry, be happy, and parade their insolent happiness in the face of all men!

At that thought, Hubert ecried with rage. What! with all her intelligence, an intelligence sharpened by resentment, she could do nothing, think of nothing?

"If I should kill them?" she said aloud, with a slight shudder. And for the first time the thought of murder haunted her like the avenging obsession which the criminal cannot drive away.



XXIV.

The house of the Ladies of Nazareth is a private establishment, founded by Mlle. de Brécourt. She was the daughter of the first President of the Rennes Court of Appeals, under Charles X, and the possessor of many millions. A disappointment in love gave this noble woman a deep disgust of the social world, and she resolved to consecrate her life to God. Her first thought was to create an asylum, wherein the victims of dissolute and libertine husbands would be sheltered from the smiling calumnies of drawing-rooms.

Later, however, a few widows of moderate fortunes, and young girls who felt no inclination for the modern marriage, in which a husband is purchased with a dowry, chose this retreat as a refuge. In 1829, Mlle. de

Brécourt erected a magnificent structure, in the midst of a shady park, at Auteuil, on the banks of the Seine. It is impossible to dream of a more calm and inviting retreat. Its iron gate, which opens into a spacious courtyard, seems like the limit of worldly Paris. The visitor instinctively feels that the poor women who suffer in heart and mind, find peace and consolation in this asylum.

The institution prospered rapidly. It responded to the needs of the unfortunate beings, in such bitter need of silence and solitude. Many donations, and even a few anonymous legacies, have increased the capital given by Mlle. de Brécourt. To-day the house at Auteuil really fulfills the aim of its foundress. A few Sisters of St. Martha have taken refuge there since the dispersion of their order, but the one hundred and ten rooms of the institution are mostly occupied by women of society, who are awaiting the legal decisions that will change their slavery into comparative freedom.

Catherine could not have chosen a better asylum to escape the slanderous gossip of the world. She was not pious enough to refuse the divorce, although condemned by her religion, but she wished to protect her name

until the blessed hour when she would become Maurice's wife.

Catherine foresaw that Maurice would oppose her resolution. For, in becoming an inmate of the House of Nazareth, she had to accede to the discipline imposed upon all newcomers entering this pious abode: obedience to the Lady Superior and to the rules of the institution, which forbid inmates to go out more than twice each month. As soon as her decision was taken, she went to visit Maurice, whom she had not seen since the famous scene.

"You! you at last!" he exclaimed, covering her hands with kisses. "I have waited and hoped for you every hour! If you knew how long the time has seemed!"

"Not longer than it did to me," she replied, tenderly.

"Now, tell me all. Where have you been since we separated?"

"I took refuge with my friend, Jeanne de Noisel. But why do you smile?"

"Because it reminds me of our first meeting on the train. You defended the wife, while I defended the husband; but to-day I admire the one I spoke so thoughtlessly of then."

"Admit that I could not have done less

than defend Jeanne. She is divorced, and I shall soon be."

"Free! you shall be free!" he cried, kneeling before her as if before a saint. "Do you know the idea can scarcely penetrate my brain? We are not slow to believe in misfortune, but we can scarcely accustom ourselves to happiness. The thought that you will be mine, mine only, intoxicates and dazzles me. Imagine! to have the joy of loving you, of loving you in the face of heaven, without causing you to blush—you, so pure, so beautiful!"

She closed her eyes, delighted by the words that lulled her like a melody.

"You are the most beautiful, the most adorable, the most charming of all women. None can compare with you."

This burst of love enraptured and saddened her. How could she make Maurice accept a separation of months? And yet, ordinary prudence commanded that they should respect the prejudices of the world to the end. It was already for her conceding a great deal to accept a divorce. Her husband's conduct excused the act sufficiently, but she must be careful to deserve no blame.

"Sit down here at my side," she said, with

infinite sweetness. "Now, you must listen to me without interruption. You have already found me very harsh, but I am going to be still more so; I shall exact a sacrifice."

"Catherine!"

"Do I not suffer also? Do you imagine that I impose all these trials on you with a light heart? No, you do not and cannot believe it."

Then, without further preamble, she informed him that she would enter the house of the Ladies of Nazareth, and remain there until the divorce was granted. Maurice listened in silence, and with a heavy heart. He had thought happiness so near, and she now imposed a new separation. What! could Catherine resign herself to such an existence! They would see each other but twice a month!

The young woman watched him closely. She saw the struggle that was taking place in his heart. Then, two big tears came into his eyes. She was moved by a deep sentiment of pity.

"Maurice," she murmured.

But it was only a passing weakness.

"Do not fear, my friend," he replied, with a melancholy smile. "I have sworn to obey

you always, and I will not fail, whatever pain it may cause me. You demand that I should cease to see you during long months; for these rare and brief meetings do not count. I consent. 'To you and for you!' is my motto. If I suffer, at least you will not know it. I shall have the pride to keep my sufferings to myself."

She tried to console him, and to impart to him a little of her strength.

"Not another word!" he exclaimed. "It suffices that you express your wishes; I will obey. I have said it, and I repeat it again: whatever you do is right. Enter the retreat you have chosen, and every day I shall go and dream over there, near the house that shelters you. I have enough love to await you, and I shall have enough patience not to complain."

She came toward him, and he seized her in his arms. Their lips met in a long kiss—the first lovers' kiss they had exchanged. These noble and high minded beings understood each other, and their souls were united. They were worthy of each other.

XXV

Mme. Andrézy was in a rage. Her best calculated combinations had crumbled, one after the other. First, she had hoped that a scandal would ruin Catherine's reputation; and the scandal had rebounded on M. de Vréde. Then, she had consoled herself with the thought that divorce would be repugnant to her sister; and Catherine was now seeking a divorce. In the violence of her resentment, she dreamed of a crime that would strike the two lovers in the midst of their hoped-for happiness. But modern society is so peculiarly organized that it is easier to conceive than to execute an assassination. For, what would be the use of her vengeance if the blow struck her as well as her enemies? There exist very inconvenient institutions, such as the police and the court of assizes,

which do not hesitate in dealing out severe punishments to young persons who allow their jealousy to carry them too far.

Moreover, she might have been capable of murder, in a fit of passion; but with the refinement of her violent nature, she was incapable of planning such revenge. And yet she endured intolerable pain. When abandoned by Maurice, she knew that he would take another mistress; and, being unable to prevent it, she had resigned herself. But, that this mistress should be Catherine! that she should become his wife! The thought actually maddened her. They would love each other in the face of heaven and all the world; they would go through life hand in hand, like the biblical couple, sheltered from all evil, excepting the inevitable separation. Her rage knew no bounds, and her wanton imagination evoked visions that drove her to desperation.

Jealousy manifests itself in a thousand forms. The sensual creature does not experience it in the same manner as one endowed with a quiet temperament, who suffers more through the heart than through the flesh. A woman like Huberte unconsciously confuses sentiment with sensation. She closes

her eyes, and dreams of the caresses of which she is deprived, of the subtle kisses that thrilled her to the marrow.

These thoughts tortured Huberte, and the more she reflected, the more she realized her inability to destroy accomplished facts. That Catherine should obtain a divorce and take refuge with the Ladies of Nazareth was only natural. But Mme. Andrézy could not believe that two persons so passionately in love could endure a separation of eleven months. One always judges one's neighbor by one's self. Huberte had believed in Catherine's virtue until now; but she was convinced that an hour would come when, conquered by their love, they would yield to the impulses of their passion. "And I can do nothing, nothing, nothing," she repeated. This distressing conviction plunged her into despair. Though truly intelligent, she dreamed of some such romantic vengeance as would have evoked a smile upon the lips of a reader of sensational weeklies. Why not feign a passion for a celebrated duellist, who would challenge M. de Fonde? But without taking the absurdity of this dramatic combination into account, she admitted that she would be as severely punished as Catherine,

since she, as well as her sister, would lose Maurice. For there existed an implacable tenacity in her nature, and in spite of all she still retained the foolish hope that her lover would return to her full of remorse and repentance.

In this again, she judged Maurice by herself. She was sensual, and knew him to be sensual also. She, therefore, believed that the young man would soon be freed from his illusion. That satiety would come, once he had obtained this so much desired woman, and perhaps because she had so long refused herself. He would soon establish comparisons between her and his former mistress. and these would not be to the advantage of the beautiful, haughty, pious prude!

Vicious beings would be dangerous, if it were not that the evil they carry within themselves destroys its own venom. Huberte was utterly incapable of understanding the powerful charm of purity. How could she know that virtue is invincible, because it is virtue? This is why there still existed a vague hope in her heart: that of reconquering her lover. Since it was impossible to do otherwise, she would wait. She was convinced that the liaison between Maurice and Catherine could not last.

For the present, she must take precautions, and beware of her husband. M. Garlin-Rueil demanded that she should remain in Arnay, and above all that she should stay away from Paris. She knew that M. de Vrède would not betray her; neither would the servants, who were only too glad to reign as masters at Les Audliettes. But she must be cautious, all the same. Until her plan was well matured, she had no wish to expose herself to the danger of a conjugal letter, ordering her to return to her retreat. She therefore resolved to live in concealment, that she might avoid dangerous meetings. Buried in the province, she could do nothing; in Paris, she could do everything. This was the thought that made her resign herself to an existence so little in accordance with her tastes and temperament.



XXVI

Since his separation from his wife, M. Garlin-Rueil often sighed at the remembrance of the pretty deceiver. He might easily have consoled himself, had he not feared to excite the criticisms of his intolerant and virtuous family. I remember not who wrote, "The first half of life is spent in boring others, and the second half in being bored by others!" The banker sometimes confided the disquietudes of his ardent nature to his spiritual adviser. Ah! one is very unhappy when one knows not how to resist the spirit of temptation. And this tempting spirit offered itself to the unfortunate man's eyes under the most varied forms. Sometimes it assumed the guise of an operatic singer at the Grand Theatre; then it would suddenly present itself in the form of a pretty little Giron-

dine, who would have turned the head of a saint.

The worthy man who had charge of M. Garlin-Rueil's conscience was sometimes sorely perplexed. Not that he was ignorant of the sad truth that it is difficult to observe the sixth commandment rigorously; but to reprove a committed fault and to quiet a troubled conscience, is not quite the same thing! He usually confined himself to vague remonstrances that would not have compromised Pontius-Pilate himself.

"My son," he would say, "place your trust in God!"

This was not very satisfactory to M. Garlin-Rueil. Trust his uneasy heart to God? That was precisely what he had no wish to do!

"If you are tempted by the devil," he would continue, "it is very unfortunate—very unfortunate. Do not hesitate to repent. Above all, avoid scandal, my son. They who fear scandal are half forgiven!"

From this, the banker drew a logical deduction; it was that he would be but half guilty, if Bordeaux, whose judgment he dreaded, remained in ignorance of his frolics. And where could he hide himself better than

in Paris? Was it not the city of indulgence and pleasures? No one would suspect the secret motive of his reiterated journeys; they would be attributed to important business, no doubt. Therefore, whenever he could tear himself from his banking house, M. Garlin-Rueil took the fast express and alighted on the Boulevard, cheerful and happy, in the anticipation of the distractions that awaited him. The honest fellow was by no means a hypocrite. He did not conceal himself to avoid being accused, but simply that he might not excite scandal.

M. Garlin-Rueil, naturally, had a companion who usually escorted him in his escapades. This was one of his college friends, an easy-going Parisian, named Fernand de Quinsac, who was wanting neither in wit nor in knowledge of the world. So, it happened that at the very time Mme. Andr  zy was concealing herself in Paris, Quinsac, on returning from his club one day, found his friend awaiting him.

"What! you here, old fellow?" he cried.
"This is a surprise!"

"I had no time to notify you."

"And when did you come?"

"Two hours ago."

“Fortunate man!”

“Why?”

“Because you believe that we still amuse ourselves in Paris! *Apropos*, are you at liberty this evening?”

“I am always at liberty—you know it well.”

“Well, then! if your—your scruples do not inconvenience you, I will invite you to dine with a merry crowd. There will be——”

De Quinsac stopped, abruptly, and burst into a laugh.

“Oh! oh! you are very gay!” retorted M. Garlin-Rueil, with a shade of uneasiness.

“How stupid you are. I have no interest in compromising you. Are you not one of my oldest friends? And I will say, between us, that you are very good to take so many precautions. You are separated from your wife—it is a misfortune I should have to bear myself, if I committed the folly to marry. Discreetly, without a word to anybody, you come to Paris for a little amusement. Where is the harm? But let us resume the subject. Yes or no, will you come to this dinner?”

The good Edouard's eyes sparkled with joy. The proposition evidently suited him, but he was divided between fear and desire.

"To reassure you completely," resumed de Quinsac, I will name the guests. You will then be convinced that you are unknown to them all. To begin with, General Maurec, an old veteran who enlivens his retreat by mingling in the gay world; then two pretty women: Clotilde Véronèse, an adorable red-haired beauty, and Nelly Birague, of the *Gymnase*."

"Stage beauties! Hum! hum!" interrupted Edouard.

"Don't be frightened! No one will know you as the honorable M. Garlin-Rueil. I will present you under the name of—of Gobert."

Fernand de Quinsac was too egotistic to care whether his friend amused himself or not. He deigned to pilot him once in a while, that was all. But the Parisian now saw an excellent occasion to play a farce. He had known Clotilde Veronése since the time when the pretty girl had been Edmond Sorbier's mistress, and was sure he could easily persuade her that she would gain a great deal by striking a friendship with the provincial. Although very wealthy, she never missed an opportunity of increasing her revenue. And if everything went well, the situa-

tion would become most amusing. The two brothers-in-law would be rivals without knowing it, and de Quinsac counted on a very laughable burlesque when they should discover the fact. This man of the world would have been greatly astonished if anyone had hinted that his scheme, however comical it might be, did not shine in point of morality. In fact, morality is only a relative quantity. It all depends on the habits we practise, the circle in which we live, and the kind of conscience we possess.

The dinner was to take place at eight o'clock, in a fashionable café. Fernand, more and more delighted with his scheme, hastened to Clotilde to prepare her for the fray.

"How charming you are to come after me!" exclaimed the *cocotte*, throwing her arms around his neck.

"I am even more charming than you think," he replied. "I came to tell you that I have invited a friend whom you do not know, but who knows you well."

"Ah! who is he?"

"A provincial, my dear, who has been passionately in love with you for—for three weeks. A provincial of ancient family; that is rich as a *rastaquouere*, and innocent as—oh! well, you shall see."

"What is the use of telling me all this?" cried out Clotilde, with a disdainful pout. "That stupid Amédée never leaves me. Since his wife has applied for a divorce he is always at my heels."

"Still, you are at liberty to-night!"

"Oh! this is just a lucky chance. I told him I was going to visit a sick aunt. But my aunt cannot be sick every day."

"I should be most sorry to injure the health of any member of your family; all the same, come and dine with my friend Gobert. Then you can decide at your own convenience."

"You are right. I am dying of hunger; let us go."

Clotilde was naturally a coquette; and moreover it required but little to win the virtuous Edouard. At the end of half an hour, she felt convinced that he would obey her slightest caprice or whim. When the party broke up at midnight, Garlin-Rueil had obtained the permission to call on Clotilde the very next day. He had the happy forethought to send an exquisite bracelet that morning before his visit. This attention touched Clotilde's heart, and the banker was immediately classed among her favorites.

They understood each other on their very first interview. But in what delicate phrases these understandings are achieved. The young woman spoke discreetly of an "old friend who—a former attachment that—" One either has or has not a heart. As to money, only very vague allusions were made to it. Gobert gave jewels, a *coupé*, even a pair of horses. And he was thoroughly convinced that he was loved for himself, for himself only. This is the penalty of such unconventional love affairs; the man is his own, as well as his mistress', dupe. Where would truth be if it were not thus? Where would justice be if the sentiments we buy possessed the sincerity of the sentiments we exchange as free and invaluable gifts?

M. Garlin-Rueil was so deeply enamored that his visit of a few days was prolonged to two weeks, and his attentions to Clotilde became more and more assiduous.

"The provincial appears very much smitten," observed Fernand de Quinsac one day.

"Yes, he is very devoted," she said, with a mocking smile.

"He still believes himself on the raft of the Medusa?"

"And yet I am not a plank!"

The event anticipated by de Quinsac was not long in coming. One morning Clotilde and her new admirer were enjoying a gay breakfast, when a maid rushed excitedly into the room.

"Madame, it is Monsieur!" she cried.

Clotilde possessed one quality at least; she was determined to be mistress in her own home.

"Monsieur," she said, quietly. "There is no Monsieur. Tell him I am not alone, and will not be disturbed." The young woman had scarcely uttered these words, when M. de Vrède, red and furious, flung the door open.

"I must speak to you!" he cried, roughly. But he stopped short, and his anger was suddenly changed into stupefaction.

"What!" Garlin-Rueil!" he exclaimed.

"Amédée!"

"What? do you know each other?" asked Clotilde, a light dawning upon her. "But no, you are mistaken, my little darling. Edouard's name is not Garlin-Rueil; it is Gobert."

These words were a revelation to M. de Vrède. Although his brother-in-law was a pious banker, he was most assuredly not

playing a pious role in this house! Or why should he have presented himself under a false name? Deceived in his wife and in his mistress! The measure was overflowing! He became livid.

"I do not know him—I do not know him—He is my brother-in-law!" he howled. "Deceived! deceived once more! It is too much! Adieu, Madame; you will never see me again."

And he rushed out, boiling over with rage, to see his place taken by this Garlin-Rueil, for whom he cherished a secret disdain. As to Clotilde, she was perfectly dumbfounded, but aided by her natural cunning, she guessed the whole truth.

"How funny!" she exclaimed.

"What?" muttered the unhappy Edouard, whose discomfiture was pitiful to behold.

"To think you are not Gobert, my little darling — but Garlin-Rueil — Madame Andrézy's husband!"

And now she spoke of his wife! M. Garlin-Rueil thought he must be dreaming.

Chance, for the second time, brought Clotilde into M. de Fonde's love affairs; and she determined to continue her role of protecting angel. This role so seductive to virtuous

women, is particularly so to those who are not virtuous nor pretend to be.

Ah! Madame Andrézy obstinately remained in Paris, threatening Maurice's happiness. Ah! well, she the mistress, would engage in the struggle with the legitimate wife, and the latter would soon see who was the stronger!



XXVII.

Madame Andrézy was preparing to go out, when a card was brought in by one of the chambermaids of the hotel.

"The gentleman wishes to know if Madame will receive him," she said.

Huberte took the card in astonishment, and could scarcely repress a cry of horror as she read the name. Her husband! How had he discovered that she was in Paris? Why this unexpected visit, which their reciprocal situation rendered incomprehensible?

"Tell him to come up," she ordered.

She cast a rapid glance in the mirror; fortunately, jealousy and anger did not prevent her from being pretty. This seductive creature had many reasons to be anxious to please her cruel husband! Did he not allow her a large income? Beside, in the depth of

her heart there still lurked the hope of being forgiven some day. How would he find her after so long a separation? M. Garlin-Rueil entered the room feeling somewhat embarrassed, but resolved not to leave until he had said all he had to say.

"Thank you for receiving me," he stammered, "I feared to disturb you."

"Is not my home always yours?" she replied with a shade of melancholy in her voice.

This seemingly insignificant phrase was full of meaning: "The law has not disunited us, because our hearts have ceased to understand each other. Who knows? It may be but a misunderstanding." And her looks, her manners, had an eloquence more significant still! "My home is always yours, because I belong to you. Whether you will or not, I am yours." And the artful coquette remembered the empire she had once exercised over this pious and sensual man. But to her great surprise the virtuous Edouard received her adroit and tempting appeals coldly.

"Thank you," he replied. "But I am forced to speak of more serious things. When we separated, I acted very generously toward you, didn't I?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"In exchange for the allowance I made you, I exacted but one condition from you: that you should remain in Arnay-le-Comte."

"But this visit to Paris is only accidental."

"I would forgive it willingly were it not that you are remaining here to injure a woman whom I love and respect."

"I, injure!—"

"Do not deny it. I know all."

How many have used these three fatidic words! Their effect is infallible! Are they not at the same time vague and menacing? Huberte was frightened.

"I do not understand," she said nervously.

"Oh! you understand very well! If I must dot the *i*'s, I will do so. You wrote an anonymous letter to M. de Vréde?"

Mme. Andrézy was wanting neither in courage nor frankness.

"You are right," she answered, with a haughty smile. "You know all; I can deny nothing. It is true, I have denounced Catherine."

"I was sure you would not lie," rejoined M. Garlin-Rueil. "You have many faults, but you are sincere. Be so to the end. Your sister has acted admirably toward you. You

owe her a great deal. Then why do you hate her?"

Huberte could find nothing to reply to this precise and direct question. Yes, indeed, her husband was perfectly informed. One word more, and she would be forced to admit the jealousy excited by her rejected love. Her husband had reduced her to silence.

"It is useless to enter into painful details," resumed the banker. "I do not want you to remain in Paris."

"You do not want! That's so—you are the master," she cried bitterly.

"And I act as a master because you act as a perfidious and wicked creature. You must leave to-morrow!"

To be treated thus! Huberte was in a fury. But her cunning instinct warned her to be prudent.

"I will obey," she murmured.

"I advise you to do so. Adieu."

For a few minutes Mme. Andrézy was completely prostrated. Everything combined to thwart her and favor the love of Catherine and Maurice! In Paris, she could watch her enemies, lay traps for them, who knows? perhaps separate them by skillful manœuvres. And now she must go! But what had

wrought this change in her husband? Whence came this fierce will, this inflexible energy? Physically, M. Garlin-Rueil no longer resembled himself. Though always careful of his person, his clothes, his manners had hitherto betrayed the provincial; now he was dressed and had the manners of a *boulevardier*. Instinctively, the young woman guessed that one person only could give her exact information on that point: this was her brother-in-law. In fact, they were allies, since a common interest united them. She immediately dispatched a few lines to M. de Vréde, who answered at once. He was awaiting his sister-in-law's disclosures with impatience. These two beings understood each other thoroughly. Both were devoid of moral sense; both were filled with the same hatreds, the same passions; and both would recoil before nothing.

"I presume you want to know how my affairs with Catherine are going on," said Amédée. "It is very simple. She has begun proceedings for a divorce."

"But—Catherine—where is she?" asked Huberte.

"At the house of the Ladies of Nazareth!"

"Ah!"

“Yes, and you must go and see her. Feign a reconciliation with her, implore her pardon—for she is very angry with you! Why? I know not. Then all will be very easy. We will know all that is going on in the enemy’s camp, while they will know nothing of our preparations. What do you say?”

“I say—I say that your plan is ingenious, but impracticable.”

“Why?”

She then told him of the visit of the morning, and the order she had received to leave Paris and return to Arnay-le-Comte. Six months previous, she might have hoped for a reprieve. A young and pretty woman always retains a certain influence over the man who once adored her. But the Garlin-Rueil of to-day had nothing in common with the Garlin-Rueil of older days. Who could have believed in such an inexplicable rejuvenescence? The pious Bordeaux banker suddenly transformed into a Parisian fop!

“I will give you the key to the mystery,” exclaimed Amédée, with a knowing air.

“You?”

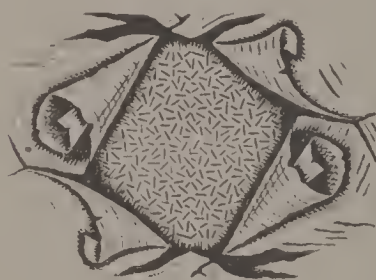
“Yes, I!”

“Imagine, my dear, that I had a—a friend who adored me. But then, she was only a

woman! Dazzled by your husband's riches, Clotilde—Clotilde is her name—has been guilty of a few little infidelities with Garlin-Rueil. I must hasten to add that she soon regretted her perfidy. A woman does not lose a man like me with a light heart. So that now Clotilde deceives Garlin-Rueil with me, instead of deceiving me with him."

The name of Clotilde was a revelation to Huberte. A light was suddenly thrown on the events that were still in darkness. She remembered Maurice's confidences: his liaison with the pretty Véronèse, and the amusing scene of the rupture which he had related in such a droll manner. It was through Clotilde that Maurice and Catherine had escaped M. de Vréde and the *commissaire de police*; it was Clotilde's influence that had Parisianized the provincial; it was the same Clotilde who forced Garlin-Rueil to show himself so rigorous towards his wife. Huberte was growing stronger in the struggle. When this bold creature saw obstacles accumulating in her path, she concentrated all her energies to overcome them and conquer. M. de Vréde had calculated right. The sisters must become reconciled at any cost. But how? Huberte's inventive genius was

never at a loss. Her brain was already at work. Without hesitating, she resolved to go straight to Catherine, knowing well that her sister would never make the first advances. What mattered one more wound to her pride when she thirsted for revenge.



XXVIII.

One of the superiorities of woman is, that she can console herself with the remembrance of happiness. When she loves, her thoughts sustain and strengthen her. To keep alive the sacred flame, she does not require the real presence, so necessary to the man. In her retirement, Catherine carried with her the secret joys of her love. Why did she condemn herself to this harsh retreat? It was because knowing the jealous instinct and the wickedness of the world in which she lived, she wished to bring to Maurice an immaculate reputation. It was natural that she should reason thus, and not like most women of Parisian society; her religious education, her piety, unwittingly influenced her. To her, divorce appeared like an immorality. The greatness of her love excused it

in her own eyes ; but at least, she would endeavor to redeem this voluntary fault by the austerity of her conduct and the purity of her demeanor.

Like all her companions in the Auteuil retreat, Catherine went out but twice a month. And how fast she hurried to the Rue de la Baume on the day of their first rendezvous ! The two fiancés passed a delicious day—one of those days that date in our lives. “*Vulnerant omnes, ultima necat*: every hour wounds, the last kills,” says the prophetic inscription on the belfry of Urugne. There are, however, never to be forgotten hours that engrave immortal souvenirs on a woman’s heart. Each minute of that blessed day repaid one of the old pains. In seeing Maurice so tender, so devoted, so loving, Catherine forgot the vulgar and libertine husband to whom fate had chained her. At first the young man had strength enough to master his ardent passion ; but as the hours glided by and the time for separation approached, he became more audacious and pressing.

“You know how much I love you. Why do you refuse yourself so cruelly, my dear Catherine ?” he pleaded. “Are we not

united forever? What in reality is a vulgar signature, hastily given in a mayor's office, beside the sacred links that unite us already?"

And taking the supple form in his arms, he strained her wildly to his heart. Catherine felt her resolutions weaken. Had he not loved a long time? She had resisted at first because she wished to remain faithful to her oath before God. But now she was free. And while these thoughts conflicted in her mind, Maurice resumed in a supplicating tone:

"You have sacrificed your religious ideas for me. And you will never know how grateful I am to you. Then why repulse me; why impose upon me a useless martyrdom? Remember how cruel are those feverish hours during which I wander anxiously around the house in which you dream of me!"

He covered her face and hands with ardent kisses; she closed her eyes; trembling, intoxicated by those tender words that re-echoed in her heart. She loved for the first time in her life, for the first time she belonged heart and soul to a man worthy of her, a man who adored her and whom she thoroughly trusted. She saw herself weakening and incapable of resisting. Her womanly modesty

became alarmed, less through revolt than terror. Kneeling before him, with clasped hand, she pleaded.

"I am yours—say one word and I am yours. Do you not know that in parting I want to keep the ineffaceable souvenir of your kisses? And yet, have pity on me, my only friend. I want—oh! not through a vain sentiment of egotistic virtue—I want the divine romance of our love to be unsullied by vulgar realities; to become your wife without having been your mistress. It is foolish! I know it well! Admit that I am foolish, admit that I have no pity for your sufferings. Do you think that I am happy? Decide! and then take me if you want me!"

As she finished these incoherent words, Catherine raised her eyes beseechingly, and he read a despairing appeal in her look.

She exacted a cruel sacrifice—but in such a way that her fiancé could not refuse to obey her.

Maurice caught her in his arms, and their lips met in a long kiss. "I love you," she murmured. But suddenly he felt a shudder agitating her body—again he read that despairing appeal in her eyes, and he tore himself from her.

"Let your will be done. Mistress or wife, command and I obey."

"Ah! how I adore you!" she cried wildly.

"In pity, not a word more," he said, brokenly.

They were silent for a few moments. She was proud of him, of him so superior to all men, in whom the appeals of passion are always uppermost. And he felt a veneration for this woman who had taught him to understand what a "virtuous woman is."

Those among us who have lived in the various Parisian worlds, especially in these days of universal immorality, have become utterly skeptical in regard to virtue. The most credulous come to consider it as an agreeable subject of philosophical discussion. And, still, behold this man of the world, this *boulevardier*, already purified by a delicate love, now elevated to the grandeur of sacrifice by contact with a superior nature. Catherine was not playing the comedy of offended modesty. "Take me!" she said. And if she added, "I beseech you *not* to take me," it was that she wished to reserve herself entirely for the accepted and promised husband.

When they separated (for she determined

to return alone to the Ladies of Nazareth) the lovers had reason to be proud of themselves. It is easy to overcome temptation once, but almost impossible to conquer it always. Catherine carried away a happiness that filled her soul; Maurice preserved immaculate the blessed image of the one he adored.



XXIX.

The next day Catherine arose, joyous and light-hearted. Her joy would not have been less if she had given herself to Maurice, but a vague regret might have mingled with it. The best human actions are influenced by a little egotism. She was happy to love a man who was noble enough to understand her, happy to have inspired him with as much respect as passion. Oh! she could now face, without fear, the prospect of the long retreat she must endure until the divorce was granted. It was one of those days in which life seems less stern, the sun brighter, the sky more smiling. When her toilet was finished she went down into the garden, where she was soon joined by a nun, who announced that a lady wished to see her. At first Catherine was astonished, then she re-

flected that it was probably one of her friends, for the world had pronounced itself in favor of the deceived wife in the sudden quarrel between herself and her husband.

"Let her come to my room," she said.

A few minutes later Huberte entered Catherine's room.

"You!" cried Catherine, in amazement, as she beheld her sister.

"Is my visit really so painful to you?" murmured Huberte, humbly.

As Catherine was too much agitated and surprised to answer, Huberte continued:

"I have acted so badly toward you! Even worse than you can suppose. It is true, I admit, that since our childhood I have hated, detested and been jealous of, you!"

She uttered these words with such violence that Catherine shuddered.

"And yet I have never done you any harm," she replied, sadly. "I love you, whatever may be your wrongs towards me. I love you because you are my sister, because we are linked, whether you will or not, by a thousand souvenirs of our childhood, because—Ah! should we not love one another doubly since we are doubly sisters? Daughters of the same mother, daughters of the same hour!"

"Pray, forgive me," said Huberte, falling on her knees.

"Huberte, arise!"

"Forgive me."

"I forgive you—but I do not want you to kneel before me."

"I obey. And yet if you knew how guilty I am! If you knew what infamies I have committed!"

"I have no wish to know. Whatever may be the actions you call infamies—tell them to God. He alone can condemn or absolve you!"

"I beseech you to hear me! After all I have done, I would not dare look you in the face if you remained in ignorance of my abominable machinations!"

These words astounded Catherine. What machinations! She could not understand.

"Sit here, near me," resumed Huberte. "Look at me with your large, sincere eyes. It will remind me of those days when I confessed my faults to you, and begged you to plead my cause with mamma. You were always loved! As far back as I can remember, you were spoilt, petted and caressed. You were the model, the example, and from morning till night I was bored by the recital

of your virtues. This is what gave birth to my hatred! But I will pass the rest in silence. If I added my jealousies as a young girl to my angers as a child, I would never end. At last the day came which created an abyss between us, an abyss which alone could bring my repentance and your forgiveness; we loved the same man."

Catherine gave a hoarse cry, that almost seemed a sob.

"Maurice!" she cried.

"He was my lover!"

The two sisters gazed at each other. Catherine was overwhelmed with terror and stupefaction.

"Your lover—your lover!" she repeated, as if in a dream.

"Oh! do not fear! It was you he loved in me! When he took refuge in Arnay-le-Comte, he had already met you, and your image pursued him incessantly. His kisses, his caresses, were for the unknown, for the one who possessed him entirely. He told me so at Aix-les-Bains, when, wild with love, I humbled myself to supplicate him."

Catherine's ideas were becoming more and more confused. So Maurice had an estate in the little town in which Huberte lived? Her

sister had come to Aix-les-Bains? Then why had Maurice concealed all this from her?

"You know me, Catherine," continued Huberte. "You know all the injury I have done myself through pride. You have often said to me: 'Your vanity is your ruin.' Ah! well, I implored the man I loved, and who loves you. Nothing could bend him. Then anger took possession of me, and——"

Huberte stopped, hesitating, not daring to go on. Catherine looked at her anxiously, as if she guessed the words that her sister would utter.

"And—what did you do?" she stammered.

Huberte buried her head between her hands and wept—shedding real tears. How could Catherine help being deceived by the *comédienne*?

"What did I do? An infamous thing! The anonymous letter denouncing you to your husband—."

"It was you who wrote it!" cried Catherine, rising, terrified.

"Yes."

There was a silence. The two sisters remained motionless. Huberte leaned forward, her head bowed with the humility of a sinner; Catherine stood there, pale, nervous

and trembling. An absolute contrast was presented in the faces of these twin sisters, so alike in features, but agitated by emotions so widely different. They were distinguishable only by the contrary expressions reflected in their faces. Yet, a subtle psychologist could have noted the dissimilarity of their natures by the dissimilarity of their physiognomies. He would have guessed the chastity of the one and the sensuality of the other.

Notwithstanding the agitation caused by this confession, Catherine succeeded in controlling her emotion.

"Then," she said, you have committed this—you have done this, driven by anger and jealousy?"

"Yes."

"As you said a few moments ago, I know you to be frank. Therefore, whatever may be your answer, I will believe you. Did no other sentiment excite you against me?"

"Was not this jealousy sufficient?"

"Yes. But I want to know. There are things which I do not understand."

"Oh! You have nothing to fear! Maurice confessed all, the first days of our liaison. After your meeting on the train he already loved you—if I can call it love. You inter-

ested him, or rather puzzled him. A hazard—what imbeciles call Providence!—brought M. de Fonde to Arnay-le-Comte; And it was you whom he found in me. Do you understand? I was fascinated, and gave myself to him at once. I am one of those happy and accursed creatures who are swayed by the fatalities of the flesh. But why relate how I went to Aix-en-Savoie; how from afar I watched and spied on you. When you returned to Paris after your cruel loss, I still followed you. You know the rest. Knowing you to be innocent, I denounced you as guilty. But Providence watched over you. The infamous action rebounded against me; instead of ruining you, it liberated you. I saw my punishment, and was overwhelmed with repentance and remorse. Then I came to you. Do you now understand why I knelt before you, why I implored you? I, so miserable and so base, I begged your forgiveness, you so high and so pure.”

“You have suffered much,” said Catherine gently.

“Yes, I have suffered!” cried Huberte, a flame coming into her dark eyes.

Catherine approached her, and grasping her hands, she said in a strange voice:

“You have wept, have you not? You have despaired of life; you have accused Fate? I know the pain of those dark and weary hours—we endure the martyrdom of love after tasting of its joys. I pity you. You have tried to ruin me? I forgive you. My heart is so full of happiness that I wish to forget all but the links that unite us. Be in peace, my poor child, since you have loved, since you have suffered.”

Catherine clasped her sister in her arms and kissed her long and tenderly. Huberte was so agitated that she could not find words to reply.

“The past exists no longer,” resumed Catherine. “Let us begin a new existence, and let our future affection for each other be new also. Henceforth rely on me as I rely on you.”

“Thank you.”

“Shall I see you again?”

“Alas! no, I leave to-night.”

“It is true, my poor child, I was forgetting that you are an exile. Ah! well, I will soon obtain the liberty you desire from your husband.”

“Ah! if you could only do that!”

“I will go and see you. It will almost

seem like the days of our childhood to be alone together in the solitude of your mountains."

"You will come to Arnay-le-Comte?" asked Huberte in a sort of joyous stupor.

"Why not? Would my visit inconvenience you?"

"Inconvenience me? I did not dare hope that you would come!"

"You may count on me."

"I am delighted. You are such a good creature that I will become better near you. Think of the cruel hours that await me, when in a few months your divorce shall be pronounced? You will become his—his wife, you will bear his name, you will be in full and free possession of each other. With my jealous nature, I will envy your permitted love; with my sensual nature, I will envy your kisses. For I know the raptures of his kisses!"

Catherine shuddered. Huberte, who was watching her, had at last a moment of joy.

"You shall see, I will guess your caresses. You must teach me to be brave. When you have taught me kindness, you must teach me resignation."

They kissed once more, and Huberte left. Catherine naively imagined she had redeemed

that sister whom she had believed forever lost. Ah! if she could have seen the change that came over Mme Andrézy when she found herself alone, once more, in the deserted streets of Auteuil! She directed her steps toward the railway, and soon reached the little bridge that spans the road. Seeing a bench in the midst of the leafless trees, she seated herself. Oh! no, she was no longer the same! A sharp wind was blowing, but Huberte did not feel the cold. Her fury and jealousy warmed her. So that simpleton, Catherine, believed that a woman like her sister Huberte would allow herself to be robbed of the man she loved without a word! She would see! But how? Yes, how could she avenge herself? A hundred contrary projects conflicted in her brain. Nevertheless, she vaguely traced a plan, the success of which appeared assured. Catherine would come to Arnay-le-Comte; she would remain at Les Audliettes for a week, perhaps two weeks. The length of her visit was, after all, of little importance, but she must come. And once over there——

Huberte began to walk feverishly. Once before, the thought of crime had haunted her. The abominable thought seized her again, as

if clutching her throat. To kill Catherine! And why not? Was not Catherine killing her happiness forever? An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

The young woman returned toward Paris, filled with this atrocious idea. Ah! Maurice thought he was nearing happiness; ah! he was patiently enduring this time of trial by saying to himself: "In ten months, in a year she will belong to me; I shall be happy." Catherine would belong to the earth only, to the earth, where her beautiful body would be eaten, devoured--and if Maurice could not bear the loss, if he killed himself in a fit of despair, well then, these two lovers who were stupid enough to remain chaste, would be forever united in death. This was the only wedding the discarded mistress would grant them.

About the middle of the Bois, Huberte stopped. She turned her face in the direction of Auteuil, and hurled enraged maledictions into space, crying aloud, so as to hear herself speak:

"You forgive me, Catherine—I do not forgive you!"

XXX.

Meanwhile the attorneys had exchanged their pretty, stamped papers. The divorce suit was "going on well," as they say at the Palais. M. de Vrède's counsel had given him the wisest of advice.

"Your case is a bad one," he said. "Your wife will win."

"Are you sure of it?" asked Amédée.

"Quite sure. You don't care much, do you?"

"For what?"

"Your wife."

"Oh! not at all."

"Then the less money spent the better. The best plan is to let it go by default—that is, pay no attention to it. Send me all the papers you receive. Continue your gay existence, and don't trouble yourself about anything."

“Bravo!”

“My plan appears—”

“Very reasonable.”

“Better still. Don't even read the villainous papers. To begin with, it is a clear economy. If you make no defense, you will have only my fees to pay, and no barrister's costs.”

The winter passed, and Amédée scarcely remembered he possessed a legitimate spouse. Moreover, Clotilde Veronèse caused him enough uneasiness. It seemed as if the *cocotte* had sworn to avenge the wife. Garlin-Rueil, still faithful and loving, visited her regularly two or three times a month. In the intervals, the pretty girl eagerly devoured Amédée's gold pieces. Each day, brought a new fancy; now it was a pearl necklace, now an emerald brooch. In the month of April, she took a fancy for a country-house, and accepted a little *château* in Seine-et-Marne. As she loved ancient furniture and tapestry, this whim cost fully two hundred thousand francs. But the following month, Amédée was forced to draw on his capital for a much larger amount. His mistress had brought him in contact with several members of the Bourse, who turned his head by their allur-

ing promises. Thinking to regain in speculation the enormous sums spent in gallantries, he invested heavily in mining stock. A rapid fall in the stock followed. But Amédée hoped for a reaction, and when at last he was forced to liquidate, this brilliant operation resulted in the loss of half a million.

Moreover, at this epoch, M. de Vréde seemed to have lost his head. All follies appeared to him feasible. And as he had no friends, there was no one to warn and advise him. Is it not always thus? We usually believe that human actions are not subjected to a superior sanction. Let us look closely and we shall find that good and evil share life equally. In this world, we are punished or recompensed, and the punishment of this wretched libertine was not long delayed.

He did not trouble himself much about his rival; though he met Maurice at the club and at the theatre, he seemed to have almost forgotten the past, and that the young man was soon to marry his wife. On his side, Maurice paid little attention to him. His life was spent in the feverish expectation of the happy day when he would again see Catherine. The rest did not count, although he spent most of his time in building fairy pro-

jects for the future. He made calculation after calculation, adding Catherine's small fortune to his own; but it was impossible to find a total of more than twenty-two or twenty-three thousand francs of income.

"What matters," he thought; "we shall not be rich, but we will be happy. Happiness is better than riches. Beside, living is cheap at Charmoises, and I can resume my projects of stock raising."

Maurice stopped short in his reflections. He had forgotten Mme. Andrézy! Impossible to bring Catherine where she would be Huberte's neighbor! Then, what was to be done? A bright, though not very generous idea came to his mind. Catherine would ask her brother-in-law to remove Huberte from Arnay-le-Comte.

One day, however, he received a letter from Catherine which made him realize the absurdity of this portion of his plans. She told him of Huberte's visit and confession. Maurice shuddered. Would Catherine love him less after learning of his short but violent fancy for Huberte? A woman's heart is so complicated; in her hour of triumph she is jealous of the former mistresses of her lover or husband. They are so many rivals

and enemies whom she has crushed and vanquished.

But the two sisters were reconciled. Then Catherine would obtain by prayer what Maurice had thought of obtaining by conjugal authority. And moralists pretend that men in love see clearly, because they have a foresight of the future! Maurice knew Catherine to be so good that he could not distrust Huberte, although he knew her well.

The day preceding the usual semi-monthly rendezvous, Maurice received, at the same time as his daily love letter, a large envelope, in one corner of which were inscribed these words: "Office of M. Lenepveu, notary."

"I wonder who he is," he muttered.

Naturally he neglected the notary's letter for that of his fiancée. He carefully read the four pages in succession, then reread them fragment by fragment, that he might satiate himself with that love which palpitated in unison with his own. Through a charming coquetry, the young woman did not complain of her harsh solitude. But he guessed all she would not say; the weariness of the long unoccupied hours, following each other heavily, and the incurable sadness of loneli-

ness. Did she not live far away from the only being who loved her? Each day Maurice perused these pages impregnated with love, and carefully locked them up before going out. It was in doing this that he discovered M. Lenepveu's neglected letter. He had completely forgotten it.

"What can this worthy notary want with me?" he thought.

The worthy notary begged M. de Fonde to call at his office, No. 15 Rue de la Pepinière, as he had an important communication to make to him. Maurice laughed and continued his monologue, as he walked down the Boulevard Haussman:

"*Ma foi*, I shall go at once. It will not delay me, as I am only going to the club. How many persons in my place would be in a flutter of expectation! But I have no relatives and no expectations. Bah! it must be some country gentleman wanting to buy Les Charmoises."

However, when he reached the notary's office he had completely forgotten the motive of his visit, and was thinking only of Catherine. His meditations were abruptly broken by the chief clerk:

"M. Lenepveu is expecting you, Monsieur," he said. "Pray come into his private office."

The notary of to-day little resembles the notary of the olden times. So it is with the usurer, the broker, the money-lender described by Balzac; they are all rejuvenated and renewed. M. Lenepveu was young, and lived like a young man. As he went a good deal in society, he knew M. de Fonde by reputation.

"I wager, Monsieur, that you little suspect the motive which prompted me to write to you?" said the notary smiling, when they had exchanged the first greetings.

"No, Monsieur, I admit it," said Maurice.

"Will you allow me a question which may appear indiscreet?"

M. Lenepveu possessed an honest face; evidently he did not speak for the pleasure of a useless chat.

"Ask me whatever you wish, Monsieur," replied Maurice.

"Are you rich, Monsieur de Fonde?"

"It is then a question of marriage?"

"Oh! no!"

"Thank you."

"I would not have taken the liberty of disturbing you for such a disagreeable affair!"

All this was said in a light bantering

tone, and yet Maurice felt that the notary's questions contained something serious.

"Let us come to the point," resumed M. Lenepveu. "You are the great-grandson of M. Defon, proprietor of a bathing establishment, Rue St. Honore, who was ennobled by Louis XVIII."

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Have you ever heard of a younger brother of your great-grandfather, who fled to the United States to escape imperial conscription? About the year 1808—"

"Yes. Although only a *petit bourgeois*, the head of my family was a passionate Royalist. The bathing establishment of which you speak, often served as an asylum for M. de Vitrolles and his friends. It is a perpetuated legend in our family. It was only natural that Napoleon I. should have tried to enroll by force my great-grand-uncle, as a punishment for the conduct of his elder brother."

"Now we are on the right path. You have never had any news of the exile? Well, I will tell you now his history."

Maurice opened his eyes wide in amazement. An American uncle suddenly coming to light. It must be an inheritance, since

M. Lenepveu was mixed up in the affair. The notary consulted some papers spread out before him, then resumed, still smiling:

"This exile settled in New York and opened a jewelry shop on Broadway. This business must have prospered, for his son continued it."

"Then he had a son?"

"I understand your uneasiness," replied the notary, laughing. But be reassured. According to authenticated documents, copies of which I have now before me, M. Defon married in 1838, and died a widower, at the age of sixty-two, in the year 1850. His sole heir, Pierre Louis, was then eleven years of age. As the latter died in 1887, at the age of forty-eight, many remember him well. He was a very active, enterprising and industrious man. In 1875 he acquired large tracts of land in the vicinity of Deadwood, Deadwood county, South Dakota, United States. You know, or rather you do not know, that in the last ten years many gold and silver mines of almost fabulous richness have been discovered in the far western part of America. Louis Defon explored his land and found—a silver mine."

Maurice's heart began to beat fast. He saw

himself suddenly transformed into a rich man as if by magic.

"I need not ask if you are following me," resumed the notary. "Through the French legation at Washington I learn that M. Defon disposed of this property for the sum of eight hundred thousand dollars, about four million francs. As I have already said, he died in 1887, without children, and as you are his sole relative—"

"It is I—"

"Yes, it is you who are the heir-at-law."

There was quite a long silence. Maurice wanted time to collect his thoughts. News, whether good or bad, always agitates a nervous man.

"It is a romance you are telling me!" he exclaimed at last.

"This romance is the exact truth, however."

"Then I inherit a fortune of four millions?"

"I cannot guarantee the amount. Louis Defon may have augmented or diminished this fortune. All I know is what I have learned from the chancellor, who received his information through the notary public of the French legation. He addressed himself to me because I am the notary of the American legation in Paris."

"One question; for you understand—"

"Perfectly."

"Since my uncle died in 1887, why have I not been notified of the event before to-day?"

"It is very simple. How were we to suppose that M. Maurice de Fonde was the heir of M. Defon. We searched, and searched in vain. One of your club friends, M. René Lestourmel, was recently appointed second secretary at Washington. Happening to read in the papers the story of this inheritance without claimants, he remembered the origin of your name, and mentioned the fact to the minister."

"I understand now. In short, Monsieur, what do you advise me to do?"

"It is very simple. Where was your great-grand-father born?"

"Rue des Maraichers, Paris."

M. Lenepveu took down a book from one of his shelves.

"Rue des Maraichers? I do not locate that name. It is a very old one, I suppose. If the name of the street has been changed, we can easily ascertain what it was called under the First Empire. It is curious though. —the Rue des Maraichers still exists; look!"

Maurice read the following line in the directory: "XX. arrondissement. From the Cours de Vincennes to the Rue des Pyrénées."

"This is what I would advise you to do: Go to the registry office of the XX. arrondissement with the death certificate of your great-grand-father, which is, of course, among your family papers."

"No doubt."

"If your ancestor was born after 1789, you will find his name in the folio of inscription; if he was born before 1789, you will find a copy of his certificate of baptism; these copies were made in all the parishes of Paris in accordance with a law passed September 20th, 1792. Let us say for instance that the first of the de Fondes was born in 1780; you will merely have to search in the second, third, fourth or fifth year following. The certificate of baptism of the youngerson must be near that of the elder."

"But suppose the elder only was born in Paris?"

"I foresaw the objection. It is serious. It is probable, however, that the two brothers were Parisians. In those days communications were difficult. Moreover, during the

troubled times that preceded the Revolution, the *petits bourgeois* traveled but little."

"You have foreseen everything, Monsieur. I do not know whether I have more admiration for your perspicacity than gratitude for your kindness."

"Let us simplify matters," concluded the notary. "Send me your great-grand-father's death certificate and I will undertake the researches, or rather I will choose the registry clerk who shall execute them. What reward do you promise?"

"One, two hundred louis in case of success."

"Two thousand francs are quite sufficient. It is a stroke of fortune for a poor devil of a clerk. You may rest assured that, if Pierre Louis Defon was born in Paris, you will be ready, in a fortnight to pack your trunk and leave for the United States.

XXXI.

After this rather exciting interview Maurice felt no inclination to go to his club. He was dazzled by this unexpected fortune. Catherine would then be rich! This woman who renounced her husband's millions to marry him, would again find the luxury she had scorned for the sake of her love. He had not the patience to await the next day. He immediately wrote a long, long letter, telling her the wonderful story of the inheritance. But when Catherine came at the accustomed hour, though smiling and cheerful, her first words were not encouraging.

"I have read your letter attentively," she said, "and the success appears to me improbable, if not impossible. In fact, everything depends on a birth certificate. Does it

still exist? It is a chimerical hope, after a hundred years."

And she tried patiently to destroy the illusions hatched in Maurice's brain."

"I know it is not for yourself," she said, "but for my sake, that you hope for this fortune. Do you then imagine that riches are necessary to me? A few millions less, a little more of happiness; this is my dream. Let us examine the situation coolly. You were in perfect ignorance of this relative. If you bore the same name, I could understand your rights to this inheritance; but the ennoblement of your great-grand father complicates everything. Believe me, the clerk chosen by M. Lenepveu will return from the XXth arrondissement in a perfect state of bewilderment. Drive these golden dreams from your mind, and think only of the happy hour that shall unite us. Only a few months more."

"You are wisdom itself," he replied. "You are always right. Let us say no more of this fantastic uncle, but let us speak of you, of me, and of our love."

It was a beautiful spring day; a bright sun smiled from a pure sky, and the cool, penetrating air gently caressed the promenaders. The two *fiancés* entered a carriage and

went to the *bois* at Meudon, where they were sure to meet no one. When they returned, happy after these few hours of an exquisite holiday, Maurice's ambition had vanished. What more could he wish than to possess this adorable creature, and devote his entire existence to her? How foolish are they who hope for happiness outside of love! When they separated he had almost forgotten his visit to M. Lenepveu. There remained but a vague regret in his heart; a regret like that of the miner, who, thinking he has discovered a rich vein, strikes only a worthless rock with his pick-ax. Two days later, he felt completely indifferent to the American millions.

Three weeks glided by thus; Maurice had again seen Catherine, who kept him informed concerning the progress of the divorce proceedings. The suit was going on rapidly. The president of the fourth section of the civil court did not even think it necessary to order an *enquête*. The written and verbal testimony of the commissaire de police, and the wild kind of life led by M. de Vréde, were such forcible evidence that pleaded in favor of the neglected wife, and besides, there was public opinion, which always ex-

exerts its influence over the decisions of the magistrates. The two young people, therefore, hoped for a prompt solution; and in fact, before the end of June, the Tribunal de la Seine rendered a decision in Catherine's favor. She was not present, but was to join her fiancé in the afternoon in the Rue de la Baume. From a retired corner of the court room, Maurice, with a beating heart, listened to the solemn words that freed his beloved forever. At last, she could go out into the world, leave the asylum in which she had taken refuge, announce to all that she would soon choose another husband! When he entered his apartments he found a voluminous package on his desk.

"Ah! a letter from M. Lenepveu!" he thought.

The notary forwarded the birth certificate of Pierre Louis Defon, dated October 7th, 1788, and four pages of supplementary explanations. Maurice required three other official papers: the birth certificate of his great grandfather; a copy of the Royal ordinance authorizing Pierre Louis' brother to call himself de Fonde; and lastly, a certificate of personal identity. The same day that gave Catherine her liberty brought a

fortune to her fiancé! It was enough to make him almost lose his senses. When the young woman arrived in the afternoon, she carefully read the details given in the notary's letter. This time she made no attempt to cool her lover's enthusiasm.

"Chance favors you," she said, smiling. "But have you taken into consideration that you will be obliged to leave for the United States?"

This simple phrase extinguished his joy.

"My dear friend," she resumed, "don't be a child. You have seen me tranquil and indifferent when I believed your dream could not be realized, but now I am ready to scold you because you do not think of it seriously. M. Lenepveu would not have followed this affair to the end if he were not sure of success. After all, an unexpected inheritance is nothing so extraordinary. And to prove that I have taken interest in your story, I will trace your itinerary."

"You!"

"Yes, I. You are astonished. But just listen. As you know, there are sisters of St. Martha in the house of the Ladies of Nazareth. One of these sisters lived a few years ago in the western part of the United States.

Well, I have had a long conversation with her, and from what she says, I calculate that our separation will be for a few weeks only."

"A few weeks? Even that is too much!"

"Do you know whether your inheritance is in New York or Dakota?"

"I do not know."

"It is probable that the funds are in New York, the legal domicile of your relative. In that case you would return in a month. If you are obliged to go to Deadwood—Let me see! From New York to Chicago, twenty-four hours, and forty-eight hours from Chicago to Deadwood. So your voyage will not be so very long. When you return——"

"When I return——" he interrupted, kneeling before her. "This is too much happiness at once! I fear that Providence, who has united us, may separate us brutally!"

"I do not share your fears. I believe and hope."

"Oh! my darling. Then, I must go?"

"You must go. Only——"

"Only?"

She blushing took refuge in his arms, and whispered.

"Do not go yet. Give me one week, only one week."

XXXII.

Maurice had sailed the previous day. Catherine had just received a dispatch, announcing that her fiancé had taken passage on the "Normandie." How cruel this absence seemed to her! "If only no incident prolonged it! she thought. The young woman had left Auteuil and was now living with her friend Jeanne de Noisel. This, however, was only a temporary arrangement; the heat was becoming unbearable, and Catherine was thinking of retiring to some quiet country place to await Maurice's return.

"What a false position I am in," she thought, sadly. "I have the right to retain M. de Vréde's name, since the divorce was pronounced in my favor; but I am no longer his wife, and I am not yet the wife of

Maurice. Ah! if I could only go far away, far enough to meet no one."

One morning she was surprised by a visit from Huberte; Huberte, smiling and happy.

"You!" cried Catherine.

"You are surprised to see me in Paris? You will be still more astonished when you learn the object of my visit. I come after you."

"After me?"

"Thanks to your indulgence," said Huberte tenderly, after she had seated herself beside her sister. "I have found peace of heart. Since you have so generously forgiven me, I want to prove my gratitude."

"Oh! what an unnecessary word!"

"I want you to do me a favor. It is now summer, and you cannot remain in Paris. Why not redeem your promise now, and come with me to Les Audliettes?"

This proposal pleased Catherine. Did she not desire to leave Paris? In other days, when the sisters were not good friends, she might have hesitated; but now, why not accept?

"Listen to me," continued Huberte; "if you refuse, I shall believe that you are still angry with me. I would be so happy—so

happy to have you with me for a few days! Are we not soon to be separated forever? Your new husband will not allow you to see me. And, in fact, I cannot blame him."

"That is true."

"It would be my salvation to have you under my roof, since instead of hating me, you would show yourself so generous. In fact, your visit might perhaps effect a reconciliation between M. Garlin-Rueil and myself."

"You believe so?"

"I will show you my husband's letter. I wrote to him for permission to come to Paris! He esteems you so highly! When he knows you are at Arnay-le-Comte, he may perhaps consent to come, and then—"

"That decides me. If I can serve you, it is my first consideration. I will remain with you until Maurice's return."

"Is he absent?"

"Oh! yes. You did not know! He is on his way to the United States."

Huberte turned her head away to hide the light of triumph that came into her eyes. Then seizing Catherine in her arms, she exclaimed:

"Then you will come! It is not a false hope?"

“I will come to-morrow ”

“Very well! we shall travel together.”

Her sister, her sister in her own home, in her power, in her clutches! During the next twenty-four hours Huberte, constantly repeated these words. She could not accustom herself to the idea that the victim was voluntarily offering herself to the sacrifice. And once over there, where no one could save her, what would she do with her? Kill her? Certainly, she would kill her. This criminal idea haunted the excited brain of the jealous woman. She was determined. Anything rather than see her *his* wife, and happy. But how would she kill her? We cannot suppress a being by simply willing it. A murder must be executed skilfully enough to escape the punishment of the law.

During the journey, Huberte was charming and most attentive to her sister, whom she seemed to consider as a superior being. The inhabitants of Arnay-le-Comte were naturally much surprised at the sudden appearance of Mme. Andrézy's twin sister. They were so absolutely alike that they became the sole topic of conversation in this little town, where curiosity predominates.

“Why has she never told us she had a sister?” they asked each other.

Huberte took great pains to reconcile herself with everybody. As soon as she had installed Catherine in the prettiest room at Les Audliettes, she hastened to visit all her old acquaintances, Mme. Poppleton as well as Mme. Balivet-Lamothe. The Abbé Mingral, however, was the only one she took into her confidence, but she begged him not to be too discreet, and to spread the news skilfully through the little town.

"I have nothing to conceal from you, Monsieur le curé," she said. "You know a great deal about my family, and many episodes of my life. My sister is divorced. Being a priest, you condemn divorce; but as a friend of the family, I beseech you to be indulgent."

The worthy priest smiled. Severity was not his greatest fault, and besides, he had a weakness for Maurice. This he proved when he learned that Mme. de Vréde would become Mme. de Fonde at the expiration of legal delays. The priest disapproved of the bad Christian who accepted the new law; the man rejoiced over his young friend's happiness. He grew into the habit of visiting at Les Audliettes every day, and as he spoke almost continually of Maurice, Catherine loved him at once.

Huberte was no longer the same. Her wild looks, livid face, and parched lips betrayed the fever that burned within her. During the day she wandered through the forest, like a monomaniac. And when Catherine expressed surprise, she replied with a constrained smile.

"You must excuse me, dear, I am suffering."

Catherine sighed, for she knew the cause of this suffering, and felt a great pity for her unhappy sister.

This unfortunate sister was devoured by a sole idea, a tenacious thought, a dream of crime! Time was flying fast, Maurice would soon return to France, and notwithstanding her jealousy, notwithstanding her hatred, Huberte had not yet dared execute her abominable project!

"Am I becoming a coward?" she asked herself.

No, she was not a coward. She did not recoil from the assassination, but from the consequences.

"I shall kill her—at night—" she muttered to herself. "Yes, in the night—while she is sleeping. I will enter her room—one stroke of the dagger—all will be over! But after?"

It was the word "after" that paralyzed the fury of the jealous woman. In that gay villa, adorned by all the resources of modern luxury, and joyously caressed by the rays of the sun, a terrible drama was being prepared; a drama of which Huberte was to be at the same time the author and the leading actress.

One day, as Huberte returned from one of her wanderings, she was met by her sister, with a happy smile on her face.

"I feel like thanking you with my whole heart," said Catherine, "you have been so charming since I am here. I was right in forgetting the past! You have become the sweetest and most exquisite of sisters."

"Catherine—"

"These four weeks of separation had seemed unendurable to me; but thanks to your tender vigilance, they have passed quickly. Now forgive me if I speak of something that is painful to you: Maurice will be here in a few days."

Huberte shuddered.

"I have just received a letter," continued Catherine, "which came on the steamer that precedes Maurice. He will therefore be in Havre Monday or Tuesday."

“And—and you are going—going—to Havre?” gasped Huberte.

“Yes; you cannot imagine how sorry I am to leave you, for I can guess the pain you conceal from me! But—”

“Not another word. Kiss me, dear; and be happy, very happy.”

Huberte was suffocating with rage. She had held her rival in her power, and through her protracted stupidity she had taken no revenge! Through fear, weakness, and cowardice! That same evening, while Catherine joyfully announced the good news to the abbé, Huberte shut herself up in her room and took a determination. She must make an end of it! Pale, shaken by convulsive shudders, she saw, in imagination, Maurice and Catherine in each other's arms. She heard their kisses, their passionate kisses, exchanged with such delight after their long separation.

“No! it is impossible. It shall not be,” she thought, then she cried aloud: “I must kill her! I must kill her!”

But there was no time to lose; in the exasperation of her over-excited brain, she took the fatal resolution:

“I cannot strike her without striking my-

self also—so much the better! What do I care for death, since he does not love me? He wanted both. He will have neither the one nor the other! To live? Mine is a beautiful life, indeed! My husband condemns me to vegetate here without distractions, without pleasures. The only man I ever truly loved abandons me to marry my sister. Since I must kill myself, to kill Catherine—let it be a suicide as well as a murder—the die is cast!”

The night was not too long to prepare the hideous denouement. Huberte knew, or believed she knew, that asphyxiation by coal-gas was not a painful death. She went down into the library and took a volume of the encyclopedia containing several articles on the various modes of suicide. On this beautiful summer night, this pretty woman, this intelligent, elegant, graceful creature, thought only of death, while around her in the garden, perfumed by the breath of flowers, the trees, the plants, the rippling brook, even the distant sighs of the sleeping plain, sang the triumphal hymn of life. She hastily perused the pages of the large volume in her hands; suddenly she stopped. Yes, here it was! The combustion of coal produces

two gases: carbonic oxyd, which poisons, and carbonic acid which asphyxiates. The first, being more dense than the air, floats near the floor; the second penetrates into the system through respiration.

Huberte had scarcely replaced the book when she heard Catherine's voice calling her:

"I see a light; is it you, Huberte," she asked.

"Yes."

"Let me in, I want to say good-night."

Catherine coughed slightly as she entered.

"I was imprudent enough to go out without a cloak," she said. "I fear I have taken cold; you were reading?"

"Yes, while waiting for you."

The two sisters kissed. Maurice's fiancée was radiant with joy; his forsaken mistress managed to force a smile to her lips.

"I am not troubled about you," replied Huberte; "a good night's sleep will restore you."

"I hope so. Sleep soundly."

"Thank you, my darling."

Yes, *his darling* would sleep soundly. Especially the next night! And when Huberte was once more alone in her room, she completed all her plans. First of all, she

must invent some excuse to send away all the servants the next day after dinner, that the two sisters might remain alone at Les Audliettes. Nothing more simple. Mme. de Vréde's approaching departure would serve for a pretext. She would send the footman to Dijon early the next morning to have a harness repaired, or make some purchases. The cook slept over the coach house, outside the villa. As to Catherine's maid and the faithful Julia, it would be easy to get rid of them between eight o'clock and midnight. And then?

Huberte's vivid imagination conjured the drama beforehand. What would Catherine do when she found herself alone with Huberte? Would there be a struggle between them? Would she not cry out, call for help, escape perhaps? As these thoughts presented themselves to her, Huberte became more and more calm. Now that her resolution was taken, she felt sure of the denouement. Her accursed sister would not escape her. And again the deserted mistress repeated the terrible phrases: "Maurice wanted both of us. He shall have neither the one nor the other!"

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The day—a Sunday—dawned bright; a balmy summer day. At an early hour Julia came into her mistress' room.

“How pale Madame looks!” she exclaimed, after she had opened the windows

“It is nothing. I slept badly. But I am uneasy about Mme. de Vréde; she was coughing last evening. Go and see how she is this morning.”

Julia went out and returned in a few minutes.

“Mme. de Vréde's cough is worse. She begs Madame to come to her,” she said.

“Very well,” replied Huberte.

Ah! the beautiful Catherine was suffering! Decidedly, fate favored her.

“My chest is burning somewhat,” said Catherine, when her sister entered.

“You are uneasy because you fear being detained here?”

“Yes, it's so.”

“You alarm yourself too much over a little cold. I shall send for the doctor, and he will soon drive away your cough.”

“I am not at all alarmed,” said Catherine, with a smile.

“I suppose you want to leave to-morrow? Well, it is better to exercise a little prudence;

remain in the house all day, and I will send for the abbé, who will be happy to come and have a chat with you."

Huberte seemed to have recovered her cheerfulness and gaiety of former days. She spent half an hour writing, and then called the footman.

"Here, Germain," she said, "take these two letters to the town. Then you will catch the noon coach for Dijon. Here is the list of your errands."

"Very well, Madame. But I will not be able to return before to-morrow."

"I shall not require your services. Ah! I was forgetting something. Before you go, you will bring the chafing dish from the laundry into my dressing room."

"The chafing dish?" stammered the astonished servant.

"Julia needs it to iron some laces under my own eyes."

Germain bowed and withdrew.

Catherine was quickly reassured. The doctor called before breakfast, and approved of Huberte's advice.

"You have but a slight cough," he said, "but a draught of air might aggravate it. If you desire to leave to-morrow, it is better

to be prudent. Resign yourself to the *ennui* of spending twenty-four hours inside the house. Take this potion every hour, and all will be well."

The two sisters breakfasted together. Catherine, joyful, because she would so soon see Maurice; Huberte, smiling, because she forced herself to appear cheerful. She faithfully kept her "big sister" company, as she jestingly called Catherine. The Abbé Mingral called on his two fair friends, and prolonged his visit until evening.

"How good of you to favor us with such a long, delightful visit," said Catherine. "Besides, I feel much better. That potion relieved me."

"And the one the doctor has prepared for the night will complete your cure."

After dinner, Catherine went up to her room, which was separated from Huberte's by a dressing-room and a small boudoir.

"I have some orders to give, dear," said Huberte, "and will then join you."

The orders were short, and their execution easy.

"Julia," she said, "I will not need you, and Mme. de Vréde also gives a holiday to her maid. You may go to the ball at Arnay if you wish."

“Really, Madame, we are both free?” exclaimed the maid, her eyes lighting up with joy.

“Yes, my child. Only do not stay out later than midnight, and when you come in be careful to go up the stairs softly. Mme. de Vrède slept so badly last night.”

Julia overwhelmed her mistress with thanks, and promised to carefully observe her orders.

There remained only the cook in the house, and Huberte knew she would retire at about nine o’clock.

“At last!” murmured Huberte. “The hour has come!”

And with a light step she entered Catharine’s room.

“You shall see what a good nurse I will make,” she said, laughing.

“Good and pretty,” replied Catherine.

“You need not try to flatter me! I shall be pitiless. I will enforce the doctor’s orders.”

“What are his orders?”

“That you go to bed early.”

“Very well. I slept so badly last night! Will you ring?—”

“For your maid. I have given her per-

mission in your name to go to the ball at Arnay, dear. Was I wrong?"

"Not at all."

"If you will kindly allow me to take her place—"

"You?"

"Will not Madame accept the services of her new servant?" replied Huberte with a little courtesy.

"You are delightful, my Huberte, laughed Catherine. Come and let me kiss mademoiselle my maid!"

The two sisters remained locked in each other's arms for a few seconds. Then Huberte assisted Catherine to prepare for bed. She still coughed a little, but less violently.

"I will sit at your bedside and give you your medicine," said Huberte.

"Is it as bitter as the other?"

"What a gourmand! It is very sweet. Here, taste it," replied Huberte, as she handed the glass to her sister.

"Thank you," laughed Catherine.

And the conversation continued, or the monologue rather, for Huberte listened while her sister talked. Faithful to her charge, she poured the medicine every half hour, and with her eyes fixed on the clock she waited.

About half past nine, Catherine felt a delicious numbness invading her.

"What is that medicine you are giving me?" she asked.

"I do not know very well; but I believe it is to relieve the cough and induce sleep."

The vial contained, not a cough mixture, but 50 grams of syrup of morphine. A quantity easily obtained, as it is not enough to make a person ill; merely enough to bring about a pleasant sleep.

"Shut your eyes, dear," continued Huberte, "and I will read to you."

She took a book and read a few pages in a monotonous tone. Twice again, Huberte aroused her almost stupefied sister, and forced her to take two more doses. At ten o'clock Catherine was asleep. Huberte laid her book quietly on the table and arose. Standing there, she contemplated her victim with tragic immobility; then walking on tip-toe, she turned the door-knob; Catherine did not move. Huberte then went through the house, visited every room; no one was there. She then carefully bolted the outside door; and all her precautions being now taken, she returned to Catherine, who was still sleeping.

"Now she is in my power," murmured the murderess. "Patience, my beloved sister! I will awaken you when the time comes. My vengeance would be incomplete if you did not see yourself die!"

She smiled grimly at this atrocious thought.

"But I must finish my arrangements," she murmured. "The windows—"

There were two in the room. She carefully closed the blinds, then lowered the thick and heavy curtains.

"Now the chafing dish."

In obedience to his mistress' orders, Germain had brought it into the dressing-room. Huberte dragged it into the middle of the room with great difficulty. Then carefully—neglecting no precaution in her work of destruction—the wretched woman set fire to the coal.

"All is ready," she said, with a bitter laugh, "I can now awaken her."

She leaned over her sleeping sister.

"Catherine!" she called, shaking her by the arm.

No answer.

"Catherine! Catherine!" she repeated louder, shaking her more violently than before.



Catherine, roused from her stupor, slowly opened her eyes.

"What is the matter?" she murmured.

"I will tell you; wake up first. Here, drink this glass of water.

Catherine obeyed without even knowing what she was doing.

"Oh! I was sleeping so well," she muttered.

"You shall sleep better by-and-by!" said Huberte, in a tone of such hatred and with an expression of such concentrated fury that Catherine felt suddenly terrified.

"Huberte—Huberte—is it you? But no—I must be dreaming," she stammered.

Huberte stood before her with folded arms.

"No, you are not dreaming, Catherine," she said. "Look well at me, sister. We are going to die."

A shudder ran through Catherine's body. She made a sudden effort to throw herself from the bed. But her limbs, numbed by morphine, seemed heavy as lead. Huberte broke into a mocking laugh, saying:

"Don't you see that you can't move! You have no more strength than a baby."

Now was Catherine invaded by an inexpressible terror. She felt herself entrapped, lost, without knowing how she was to die.

“Let us talk, if you please,” resumed Huberte, gravely, her brow contracting. “You know that I have always hated you—always. And you believed in my repentance when I asked your forgiveness over there at Auteuil? Fool!”

The unfortunate victim tried to rise, to struggle. With a slight push, Huberte threw her back on the bed.

“Help! help!” cried Catherine in despair.

“Oh! you may call! No one will hear you. There is no one in the house. Even had you the strength to open the windows it would be useless. The garden is deserted also. I have taken all my precautions. Look at that coal, that burning coal. It is your death and mine! We shall die like *grisettes*, my dear. It is the best I could do!”

Catherine gathered all her remaining energy and uttered such a cry for help that the murderess was alarmed. But she quickly recovered, exclaiming:

“No, Catherine, no; that’s useless. For I tell you again you are lost. And so, my dear, you robbed me of the only man I ever loved, and you thought I would not avenge myself? Listen; Maurice will arrive at Havre to-morrow. He will jump into a train. Oh!

he will be in such a hurry that he will not stop on the way. He will come here—he will call you—he will ask—where is Catherine?—and they will answer—Catherine is in the cemetery.”

Catherine had no strength to reply; she was sobbing bitterly.

“You weep?” continued Huberte. “You are a coward. Do I weep? I could not kill you without killing myself also. So I sacrificed myself. It is a beautiful full-fledged hatred, is it not? We were born together; we will die together.”

She paused a moment; she was becoming dizzy; the light and perfidious vapors of the coal began to fill the room.

“All is over, all is over, my dear! Ah! your beautiful love! How far away it is from you now! Your wedding couch will be your grave! I tell you once more: look at me well, sister. We are going to die. Farewell. We shall meet above—or below—or not at all. I know not!”

Huberte again broke into a mocking laugh, as she felt the deadly vapors overpowering her, and resumed:

“You, on your death-bed. Me, at your side. Both suffocated. This is how they

shall find us to-morrow! Oh! I was forgetting! What was I thinking of? I did not light the tapers!"

With a faltering step, Huberte walked to the chimney and lighted the candles. And the lights shone on these two beautiful women, so young, so full of life, who would so soon be but lifeless bodies! There was a short silence, then Catherine uttered a feeble cry, like the sob of a child. Then she fainted away.

Huberte leaned over her victim; a flood of confused thoughts filled her brain.

"She will die first," she murmured. "Only I shall suffer, suffer much. More than her! What will they say? Where have I heard that music before? Oh! what beautiful music. Heavens! how my head aches."

She made an effort to walk and fell on her knees. A new dizziness overpowered her, and she fell at full length on the carpet.

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When Catherine again opened her eyes, a flood of fresh air was rushing through the open windows. Seated at her bedside was the Abbé Mingral, still quite upset by the terrible event.

"You are very pale, my poor child," he murmured, pressing her hand.

“And very weak,” she replied.

Her body felt bruised and shattered, and she also felt sharp pain in the region of the heart. But she felt she was alive, and very much alive.

“I do not understand,” she rejoined. “What has happened?”

The explanation was very simple. Julia had not obeyed her mistress' orders, and returned at three o'clock in the morning instead of midnight. Finding the door bolted, she had entered through a basement window. As she was ascending the stairs a terrible odor of coal gas nearly choked her. In her terror, she rushed out calling, screaming and weeping. The neighbors were aroused, and broke open the bedroom door with axes.

“This is how you were saved,” concluded the abbé, “but unfortunately we were too late to save your sister.”

At the mention of Huberte, Catherine trembled with fright. She lived over the terrible scene; she again heard the burning words of the murderess. By a violent effort she managed to say:

“Huberte is then—”

“Dead. The doctor has been trying to reanimate her for half an hour, but in vain.”

There was some terrible mystery she could not understand. Why was she saved and Huberte dead?

The worthy abbé saw the hand of Providence in this unexpected denouement; but the doctor explained it in a less mysterious and more probable manner. In a state of syncope, life is suspended. As Catherine had fainted, she had inhaled very little carbonic oxyd. Beside, carbonic acid being heavier than the atmosphere, it had remained in the lower portion of the room, and had reached the level of the bed, where the young woman lay, only a few hours later. Huberte, on the contrary, overcome by the carbonic oxyd, had fallen to the floor, and must have been immediately asphyxiated.

"Huberte dead!" repeated Catherine, terrified.

"Fear nothing, my child," said the abbé. "No one will suspect the truth."

"Then you know?"—

"All. Do not fear. The doctor and myself easily reconstructed the drama; but we will both be silent. Everybody will believe the catastrophe due to imprudence."

Catherine buried her face in her hands.

"May God forgive her," she murmured.

“Now you must hurry and get well,” rejoined the abbé. “Remember that happiness awaits you, and that you have deserved the joys in store for you. And you must be pretty, very pretty, within forty-eight hours. You cannot go to meet Maurice, but Maurice will come to you.”

“Ah! Maurice!” she repeated, her heart filling with joy.

“I cannot bless your union, my poor children,” resumed the abbé, shaking his head sorrowfully. “But I will pray for you.”

“Ah! how good Heaven is,” cried Catherine.

“Nothing now menaces your happiness. You will be my parishioners, will you not? You love each other, and the future opens before you joyous and smiling.”

Then the abbé’s thoughts sorrowfully turned to Huberte, and he added:

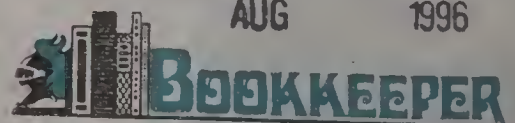
“Yes, God is good, but he is also just.”

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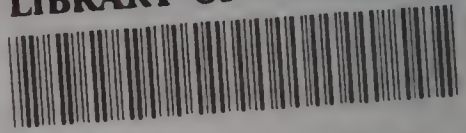
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